

# **Breaking the Barrier**



# Breaking the Barrier

*Poems* by Lenny Koff

## Acknowledgments

The following poems appeared in *Poetry/LA*: “For Simon Rodia” (1981), “Holy Places” (1982), “Green Concern” (1982), “The Aquarium” (1984), “I’m Lost Without You” (1985), “Material Revelation” (1985), “Meditation and Flight” (1986), “Finding the Center Again” (1986), “The Slow Rite” (1990).

The following poems appeared in *The Sculpture Gardens Review*: “Triumph” (1987), “Rumor” (1989), “The Way It Was” (1991).

Cover photo: Allen Grindle, “Bird.” Oil on canvas, 2016, 48 x 36, collection of Wendy P. Carroll

Copyright © 2021 by Leonard Koff  
All rights reserved.  
Los Angeles: FreeReadPress, 2021  
ISBN:9798750106455

## Contents

“No one believes the old stuff anymore”

I. Inside ..... 3

“I make it to the bottom”

Holy Places

“Keep everything within”

Hear This Voice

How They Appear

“Rumor is as hard to unspread”

Uneasy Sympathy

Dark Bestiary

II. Outside ..... 15

October

The Aquarium

“The element of paradox”

A New Age

Meditation and Flight

“As he died”

The Unredeemed

“The point that fixes me”

“I am what I eat”

Finding the Center Again

Triumph

The Dislocations of Summer 1492, Midnight

The New World

The Ascent

Primo Levi Got It Right

Imagining One Text

H<sub>2</sub>O  
Two Cellists  
Green Concern  
I'm Lost Without You  
Exposure  
The Slow Rite  
"This wonder world"  
Being Present: To My Teacher

III. Up There ..... 45

To Our Dog, Under the Piano  
The Way It Was  
To the Memory of Doris Savery, My Music  
Teacher  
To the Father  
Out of the Closet  
Letting the World Be  
For Simon Rodia  
"I spoke to her my phone"  
Music of the Spheres: Beethoven  
Mrs. Halpern & Aunt Miriam  
Material Revelation  
Breaking the Barrier

**No one believes the old stuff anymore.**

The brain is merely a body part  
and if multivitamins make a difference,  
so does psychopharmacology.

So what I write may only appear  
to experts as electrical misconnections.  
But to me the page is fired with meaning,  
with longing.



I. Inside

**I make it to the bottom**

watching hills ascend behind me,  
trying to stand still as I descend,  
seeing appearances, a ladder of guides  
waiting there, each one sent by another  
to my moving spot.

As I extend my hand, I reach their place  
and each one takes me in his turn,  
passing me like a chain of events.

The field is wide,  
and so is the care I'm shown.  
I've arrived somewhere.  
I think the only thing that matters now  
is duration, and I am right.

Then, suddenly, as if a rare and knowing animal  
were moving through a crowd—  
a celebrity entering the room—  
everyone is backed against the wall.

Something's intervened, driving my spirit higher,  
chest tightening, breathing at the top,  
getting faster and thinner.

If only I could stop and lower my shoulders.  
If only I could laugh out loud like a flood . . .

But I avert my eyes,  
full of duty I hadn't felt before,  
ringed by an outstretched arm that fools no one.

Change has happened,  
and like a servant waiting patiently  
for the tears he will expect,  
I drop to my knees before the statue of the saint.

### **Holy Places**

It's easy to worship God high up. It's the view.  
The air's enough for Him there,  
clear as the eyes of Alpine women,  
close to the earth from a straight and narrow road.

If God hindered prayer, which He never does,  
He couldn't swear off turning a good ear  
to the slopes and soars of the Olympic Village.  
Getting Him underground is something else.

Before the Gothic reared its head,  
broke walls, let light in braced by flying poles  
of high, untamable stone, men sat under columns.

The force of the spirit there, like weights on a clock,  
was steady. People sustained it as they could,  
the flat, the pug, the squat, shoulders anchored  
next to each other and always touching.

**Keep everything within.**

But the past like a meal and what you feel now,  
are denied.

Then nuke the real world  
like the one inside. Vaulting into air  
will open drifts of light.

Behind angelic clouds is  
white bottomless reach.  
So here it is. Enameled teeth  
washed with anonymous salt,  
incessant gray and silver waters,  
and the timeless sand of quiet.

### **Hear This Voice**

Thus Him from the mountain top:  
Why must I deal with small men, upright?  
If they stand before me, as tall as they can,  
I only have to close my lids and they lie prone,  
a stack of tombs.

The man of peace below,  
blinded by a purity like mine, fears the sun.  
He lets me float above the city, like a prophecy,  
accommodating anything, dressing in the dark.  
I have made his shadow with a top hat  
wait outside because I have a sense of humor.

### **How They Appear**

Behind the walls, within the ceiling,  
things—hundreds of them—small and dark,  
dodge microscopes,  
hide beside white blood cells like mimes.

We know they're watching us; they know it's coming—  
lights that flush them out.

See them hurry to any portion of the blood  
that eludes syringes, the pull of inspection,  
waiting for their future when history,  
like a quarter spinning on a table,  
winds down to a small flat noise,  
the value of their presence soaring like a grin.

**Rumor is as hard to unspread**

as butter. If it melts into a piece of bread,  
you can still taste it.

Try and wash each finger. Oil won't mix in the basin,  
but floats to the tile, sucks at the rim,  
yellow and hollow.

All the bristles in the medicine chest  
only dig it more thoroughly into the white enamel  
like a smile.

### **Uneasy Sympathy**

I saw a man who had no shoes.  
And all my prayers could not refuse his eyes.

He was mumbling from a book,  
a paper chase like one I'd know before  
in another caterpillar man.  
I hoped that he would understand.  
Then fly ...

Yet nothing in his reaching eye  
assured me at my moving height  
that he would triumph, seated, bound,  
my guard of corporations at the bottom of the night.

### **Dark Bestiary**

The ape's half human, as blind as a baby.  
His fine, wet fingers do not understand:  
the right to eat is not inalienable.

Shrieking and his greed have grown from nothing.  
He is not to blame.  
When food is assured, safety is not.

2.  
The foolish ox is the old way, a sacrificial animal.  
He is yoked like a god, but is only human,  
deaf and dumb.

His divinity is patience. His burden labor  
that forgives him nothing.  
In his eyes, surely, he can't be much.

3.  
The scrupulous spider constructs a web  
as frail as skin. His care is human. His home welcome.  
The fly is a fair guest.

What is evil in a miser is necessary in a spider.  
He is his trap,  
because absolute care is desperate.

4.  
A slow and selfish caterpillar noses into every leaf.  
He eats and sleeps  
and soars to resurrection like a clumsy beast.

In all his wildest dreams, the wings of a bird  
never meant so much, as cool as silk,  
high, light, transparent with personal grace.

5.

He's as busy as a bee, making honey of activity.  
His rank is perfect when his work is done  
in a closed community.

Once he saw the beehive, for a second slept  
and lost his step.  
Looking up is dangerous in a perfect world.



II. Outside

**October**

The driest light comes lowering through the window,  
and the wind that clears the distant slopes of dust  
brings vaulting rooms, the song of irresolvable summer.

In this particulate air, settling on leaking cups,  
on flying saucers, nature mocks routine,  
an interminable invitation to see between the spectacle.

Then we are full of rippled vision,  
waiting patiently for someone's long drive home,  
the promise of cold forms, a change of season.

### **The Aquarium**

I have seen with fish eyes,  
always looking, a mute sloping face.

Eyelids are my only danger,  
not the night.

My eyes are as big as my body.  
Swim in my head.

But the current, round as a globe,  
circulates predictably.

From your side of the tank,  
it looks as if we share a world.

I'm writing in a mirror  
now that I notice it again.

I can feel the back of solid water,  
to you only a medium like air.

**The element of paradox.**

Who likes it?

When air moves,  
you can't do anything about it,  
an animal predicament  
like the dinosaurs' in the pit.

When it's still, it goes unnoticed,  
an empty distance, until you fly a kite.

Then you soar, despite your best wings:  
angelic disappointment like a breach . . .  
The space between you  
and the ceiling isn't vacant after all.

You fall in full view of the reviewing stand,  
where everybody claps  
until they see what happened  
to the paper airplane you built for yourself.

## **A New Age**

I've spent hours doing technical work  
in cool, white clothing that I never change,  
calculating functions, formatting pages,  
page after page, the program,  
like a younger brother,  
executing instructions without fail.

This hour after hour  
is not like paging the sea  
whose secrets stretch below  
a flat that calms.

    A fall in my cubicle  
does irreparable damage  
because nothing gives.

One hits the cinder blocks,  
but still not below anything.

I'll continue through the inexhaustible readiness  
of the machine, inexorable repetition,  
my hands on the keyboard in anticipation.

### **Meditation and Flight**

No one can bear the labyrinthine silence,  
the touch of single cells.  
We're always talking confidentially,  
like neighbors on the telephone.

Extended on a wire, the mind is all that's left  
of public corridors and Roman amphitheaters.

Nights bring absolute presence,  
the cavernous light, a TV screen,  
dark illumination born of women  
to the man of elephants.

What I dream is a genealogy of mind.  
I outdistance my own nature.  
I am gone to meet creation.

There light's awash like a finger painting,  
a peach and limestone afternoon  
held firm by clouds of air enough to wrap a baby in,  
a chapel for an infant laid in chefs of lutes,  
stringed gambas and a coronet.

But the sun pierces nothing again.  
The clouds threaten absolutely.  
For moments the heart sings,  
straining like a pastel wire,  
proud of a jesting temperament,  
a lightning-like embellishment.

then angelic filigrees of laughter,  
everlasting disappearing acts.

All I really see is a timeless pattern  
buzzing like an insect.  
Sure video, not a game,  
plays across Formica walls.  
No one dares knock.

My movie magazines, piled on the stand,  
and pillows, downy like a fall,  
have their own archaeology.

**As he died, she danced,**

her husband's record on the phonograph  
they lugged from up the Mississippi—  
a firm square step that turned archaic whirl.

Wolves alone stood waiting in the grass  
until the needle stopped.

Her silence made them stand three days,  
then leave her to the archeologists.

They found the wooden world, the planks,  
the unburned wood.

Among her things a camera  
and daguerreotypes of windy days,  
a scene in summer fields,  
a snowscape ending the horizon.

The album they assembled carefully  
lies opened in the State Museum,  
framed by a dry florescence always on,  
guarded every day 'til five.

## **The Unredeemed**

What does he think of the Passover table —  
the roasted egg, burned on one side,  
balanced on the plate so it won't roll freely?  
Half its yolk is showing,  
the white covering the yellow like a robe.  
The sacrifice isn't naked. It's afraid,  
unwilling to be sent to the flames.

He floats in the bowl of tears  
placed to his right, the salt water  
in which everyone dips twice,  
marking the redemption.

In his Sea of Reeds, he holds fast  
to any sprig, a raft, a continent  
that carries him beyond the rim,  
parting from them as the sea was parted.

His feet touch no dry land.  
He hasn't drowned with Pharaoh's army,  
or crossed to another side.  
He remains a miraculous distance,  
only seeing what has been done,  
but not for him.

**The point that fixes me**

without reflection is an unmoved target.

I am standing still, its duplicate,

completely behind glass,

a mounting with statuettes, diplomas

on the television set in the family room.

You made me wait until I sagged to the floor.

The chair lost its grip and I melted.

The guests continued to eat.

The butter knife wasn't needed.

**I am what I eat,**

nourished, free of symptoms,  
with grace that has chosen wisely.

My legs will not suddenly give way  
irrational, confused,  
disoriented, wildly restless.

What revives me is a balanced meal—  
encapsulated juice, eggs, toast, and jam,  
with cream and sugar inside.

I am always human shortly after,  
standing on my own two feet.  
I think at this level life is good.

Then worship on connecting networks,  
talk before the laundry's finished  
and the dry cycle begins.

I catch a version of someone complaining  
about nuclear family life,  
the kind that changes nothing,  
for every breakthrough feels  
like somewhere else.

But I've my windows:

*I'd go mad without you,  
the infinite space which you keep back,  
your infinite natural poise.  
No wall has your natural wit.  
You are, between everything and nothing,  
thick.*

### **Finding the Center Again**

Sometimes along the California coast,  
where hulks of trees make impassable  
the sheer climb inland and a redwood diner  
hangs off Highway 1,  
I stop for something.

And I always see above the tide,  
calmed for a moment by Promethean cliffs,  
that ancient figure chained.  
I am silent too, waiting for lunch.

I know the narrow god who bound me here  
will one day fall, a forest giant,  
stiffened limbs waiting to be raised  
above undifferentiated children  
crawling to him noiselessly  
up a thousand marble steps.

Then, like a child, I stand outright, too,  
a shaping rebel on the wooden floor,  
a surface in jeopardy, calling down fury  
at my coronation over the sea.

My bride on a wooden ship  
sails to the flat ends of the earth  
and I plummet to the moss below  
a flying fish.

The waitress from Berkeley  
is also doing work-study down the coast.

She never says a word; my number's up—

a quick sandwich on a plate—  
but I imagine her omniscient  
like a smile.

I have hot coffee,  
wondering if my father's home.  
Lunch is filling like a cold idea,  
and I'm going south again to Los Angeles.

## **Triumph**

Each Thursday up the steps,  
below the canopy of wind-braced cloth,  
beside impatiens rooted modestly around  
concentric pots, the lines of maids  
habitually come to clean.  
I have seen them all  
simultaneously buzzed in  
like a revolution.

What they do, they do all day.  
But sometimes when the hall's ablaze  
with their deliberate light,  
and every door is opened to the radiance of glass  
above the silver flatware,  
knives and forks and spoons for bouillabaisse,  
with ripe, explosive fruit—  
the ceiling-high French doors recede,  
the parquet dims and maids undress.

Arm in arm,  
they dance down corridors  
of knee-deep shag, blowing in the wind,  
take tea and sugar cakes  
in repossessed designer rooms,  
exchange high heels.

They dream, as if themselves again,  
of reeling on a mountain top  
amid their clustered fruit  
until they cannot feel the floor beneath them,

hear the wax perfected to a waterproofing  
meant to catch a petulant spill  
sometime in the following week  
before they're here again to mop.

The secret laughter  
in this monumental habitat  
echoes down to dinner time.  
It stops when everybody's home  
as if nothing happened.

Each bundle of a maid  
gets kissed good-bye,  
and now and then a polo shirt,  
too small below for the full, immodest  
belly of a citizen.

The family eats.  
Only the parakeet, the pet  
they bought, sits quietly in his cage,  
exhausted.

### **The Dislocations of Summer 1492, Midnight**

Think of what Columbus must have seen.  
The Jews in torchlight, docked,  
waiting for their ships.

But they were fooled, turned back,  
welcomed by the Sultan of Turkey,  
an eastern place.

Columbus sailed away,  
hearing only the silent flat blue straight ahead—  
the expanse we know is round,  
the dome of heaven we know expands—  
his eyes concentrating on the moment  
when he thought he'd fall to his doom,  
plummet to no bottom over the edge of the earth  
or miraculously see the slip on the horizon  
he would call a new India.

Was he, too, fleeing the panic of exile,  
the return of history that sent the Jews in the wrong direction?  
He faced a suddenly known world that had their own  
story.

But when he landed safely, he remembered that he brought  
his memory with him  
and constructed his tent over the island.

The Indians were invited to convert,  
to change direction, and those who finally refused,  
full of dying conviction,  
he met outside for one last talk.

## The New World

Those outside on the Zocalo,  
their holy temple ground obliterated,  
now walk humbled on their knees  
across the flattest public square in Mexico.

Ahead a massive Salamanca door  
gives no hint of what is changed inside the Cathedral.  
Its bloody stones were lugged from steps  
out here on which ascending people  
prayed to a lighter god.  
And when the Spaniard came  
silver-helmeted, they fooled themselves.

Now they kneel—those who never came inside—  
inside this vaulted heaven,  
praying to a high white Christ,  
His attenuating fingers, like a tree of death,  
touching their forgiven wounds,  
the hearts they sacrificed anticipating Him.  
Only He from out the lap of Mary rises.

Do they know whose stones these were?  
How their first joy betrayed them  
to the rows of hooded men  
singing plain calm song *ad Virginem*?  
The hills above Tenochtitlan, shorn of trees,  
a stubble mound, are sweet with blood  
and absolutely silent.

### **The Ascent**

I saw him in the distance on the escalator,  
then moved on.

But he approached  
as if he knew my name.  
He was looking for a book, *The Long Way Home*,  
on the second floor of Barnes & Noble.

When he spoke, I moved completely  
to his section on the self, turning my head  
to the volumes still sealed, their uncracked spines  
a secret history.

Like him, I became an observant man,  
looking down and finding in the book that I was reading  
the description of the *baal tefillah*,  
the master of prayer, the reader—

I was leading the congregation  
from the center of the synagogue,  
stepping down to the lectern  
set in the ground like a bunker.

*Out of the depths I cry to thee,*  
my voice ascending to the heights of men,  
just beside him where we prayed,  
fulfilling a law the heart has known—  
whatever soars, or could soar, at a moving level.

**Primo Levi Got It Right**

How easy to keep memory out  
than be free of it. Euphemisms do it,  
which don't shut the door  
so much as open it to perfect air  
and perfectly colored sky  
into which we run, fleeing the brown edges  
of the valley where smoke gathers and cinders fall.

Phrases make new history,  
like *special treatment* and *final solution*,  
coming to our salvation  
when the judge executes the final question,  
*What were you thinking of when you did it?*

And the answers that affirm a life,  
the transition from lies to self-deception—  
*I was ordered to; my superiors committed acts  
far worse than I; the environment in which I lived;  
the others would have done it;  
how could I have acted differently?—*  
have all about them the pathos of would-be rescue.

Our reasons push us up against  
a vast mechanism we cannot see,  
except by eyes averted and by calls for grace,  
as if we too were victims.

And even those who have kept memory at bay  
with illusions of reunion,  
of someone coming home

from forests or a peasant's cellar,  
know the guilty, too, want life.

So no one names what happened,  
and the truth, a cloud of witnesses  
like bits of bone immediately ahead,  
passes over us so fine  
we feel no bruising on our skin.

### **Imagining One Text**

To Abraham He promised numberless children,  
then gave a child to the Abraham  
Sarah knew not,  
the amusement of a lonely god  
who always keeps his promises,  
a second son delayed  
until she laughed at her incomprehensible blood.

He was the father of cousins  
who almost spoke the same language,  
though silence forced them into separate caves.

It'd take more than a thousand years  
on everybody's calendar until they'd drew away  
from a line in the sand,  
until they'd sit together by the river all must cross.

## H<sub>2</sub>O

When are atoms wet? At what perspective?  
At what distance?

I have backed myself like Orpheus into focus,  
having turned my back on someone I still love.  
I know she comes to me as water,  
hoping to be wet.

She was only disconnection, only free.  
But for a terrifying second, if I turn my back,  
descend to her—electricity.

Too close to atoms, we'll have lost our touch;  
we'd ricochet off stone.  
But if we wander in the space we own,  
we circle like invisible parts, not predictably,  
but bound like constellations that are wet and fiery.

## **Two Cellists**

We sat behind our instruments,  
you, a lover I could reach in dreams,  
drawn to match my tone for tone itself.  
Your presence filled the room, filled me.

But I suspected nothing  
when you turned the page and changed the key.  
In front of everyone,  
my fingers lost whatever grip they had,  
missed the slide. The steel string slipped.  
I hit the bridge, then the water,  
skidding on the pull of shadows,  
severed from a thread-like grace.

### **Green Concern**

The roots of green concern need water.  
But each mind makes its solitary bed its own encounter.

I would have tended yours—the tree, the cup,  
the granulated stone, a tender garden—  
combing the air, your secret wish for equilibrium,  
symbolic pools rubbed smooth, inviolate.

Here, half a valley away  
my roots are glazed with salt.  
Like open mouths for rain  
they come to the surface an open spectacle.

Like anger roaring from the unengaged,  
the wind has blown the darkness, the design.

This death is willful. It's my power  
to amaze the rain of spring I would drown in.

**I'm Lost Without You**

I rode the lines of a leaf, bloodless rivers, thin lagoons,  
where light has bleached green filaments  
and membranes keep the oxygen back.

There beyond the conical tip the terrifying spaceless plane  
beyond the reach of leaves. I'm an open hand  
always drawn back by hidden strings,  
then an astronaut cut loose from his tubing,  
sailing the windless night, looking.  
The unanchored ship was motionless.

## **Exposure**

There's natural history to sculpture.  
We learn it, too.

Once bracingly erect,  
the human form stood one foot forward,  
gravely frontal, like a chorus in heaven.

Then without warning,  
the frame gave way at the bone.  
The earth tilted on its axis twenty-three degrees,  
a hair-line fracture.

                  We leaned to one side,  
curving from the waist,  
the curtain going up  
behind the fluted gown.

**The Slow Rite**

(for Timothy Steele)

Think how well the lacquered cup and bowl  
have shaped our ceremony,  
intercepting hunger with a human grace,  
a near miraculous iconography.

Then surfaces tame the surface,  
and things seen between people come to matter.  
Veneers master, where no transcendence interrupts a  
    meal,  
our cool embracing need for circles.

Bound to the earth, we carefully put on a human face  
and hold one back.  
Gestures, like a net of steel,  
know, acknowledge, and pretend.

**This wonder world**

where words appear with the touch of digits,  
the power of plugs, illuminating the power book  
before which we sit.

Each of us logs on facing front,  
the eternal position, hands on the keyboard,  
where digits lead us around by the nose.

Yet the word itself is missing,  
the response that needs concentration,  
the slow answer, for whatever else it is,  
the truth isn't fast. It's proved on bodies that align,  
on a place, a predicament.

Better that we lug ourselves from desk to desk,  
wagging our fingers, even as we read.  
Conversation stirs everything up  
where the heat is,  
and we talk until the light  
comes through windows  
and we are light again.

**Being Present: To My Teacher**

(to Léonie Adams)

You sat in the classroom like a page,  
an oak stump bound to your profession,  
deliberately smoking one cigarette after another,  
a deathless train.

By now you're dead.  
But I remember tiny eyes and careful words,  
never suggesting a false start.

One had to listen very closely,  
for you were the real thing,  
stooped with dry weeping,  
an immortal extinction.

Each Tuesday night was sunset,  
and although I only showed you  
two of the things I wrote, I felt you understood  
the rest of my week,  
like gold that sanctifies matter at sunset.



### III. Up There



**To Our Dog, Under the Piano**

Death will come like a magic wand.  
There'll be no flying fur when she is gone.

Resting is the unwrapped present.  
Life, the gift she keeps.

We can only watch and cradle,  
putting out a bowl of water.

What she tastes is fine as powder.  
What she wants may not be here.

## **The Way It Was**

1.

When my mother died suddenly,  
I imagined grounds of bodies, tombs of kings  
over the hills of the high cemetery.  
I wasn't prepared for the vacant lawns,  
stoneless lots, except for my spot.

I see her plaque covering a shaft  
to an underground room. From where I stand,  
the winds have drained like water from a sink  
into the Hall of David.

2.

I'd like to think the Temple moved,  
but our house didn't split.  
Mortar dried out. Stone slipped.

But aunts and uncles, cousins and cousins  
I never met, braced one wall at a time.

Then it wasn't one thing after another.  
It was the same thing.  
My father couldn't stay put.  
He kept shutting doors.

I aligned the shades, set the lamps in the den  
on automatic timer and went to my room.  
In the hall, lined with photographs, framed and dated,  
one by one, hangs a private life.

3.

I kept my hands to myself,  
carried them like fins around my waist.  
I moved the furniture everywhere,  
smoothed covers, vacuumed the shag,  
and the rooms fit.

But when the current changed everything was back  
where it had been.  
She left me sitting on an egg.

My responsibility was to keep the backyard green,  
the tree in front downy.  
I let the hose run into every garden bed,  
but kept the drapes pulled.

4.

I dreamed the same thing again:  
her eyes got rounder and rounder,  
looked at me like peacock feathers.  
In every other way, she put up no resistance.  
When I left the air was purple.  
I decided to move out.

My sister, crying in the next room,  
dusted our house with feathers,  
and I moved back.

**To the Memory of Doris Savery, My Music Teacher**

She walked like the pendulum of a clock,  
heavy and light, out, returning.  
Everyone knew her ways—  
we marked our days by hers,  
appearing, then disappearing,  
like weights falling back to the same spot.

No one believed she died.  
We counted our time  
as if she'd still appear, light and heavy,  
out, returning,  
pupils coming back and forth  
to the couch where she sat listening.

Since ten, my chair pulled next to hers  
an hour every other week,  
she taught me cello,  
taught me more, my metronome,  
a time for everything, even dying.

She sits there still, my music lesson,  
heavy and light, returning.

**To the Father**

(for Richard Taruskin)

To watch the light pour  
through his fingers like sand,  
to hear breathing from a man like this,  
his sounds moving absolutely higher  
through his frame  
until they rest continuously in his throat.

Then a handkerchief falls  
from the top of the stairs  
to the son playing cello below,  
and the curtain billows  
on air indistinguishable  
from heavier chords in the house.

Everyone listens closely.  
He steps outside,  
and suddenly, like tenuous threads,  
he's everywhere, a light like wind.

Holding our breath,  
we cut the fabric on lapels,  
our last connection,  
then exhale to meet him.

### **Out of the Closet**

You forbid us this memorial at the sea.  
You forbid us entrance into worlds about you  
we already knew.

What impossible tasks you set yourself,  
mystifying energy, as if we could forget  
your whirling laugh at folly, ensnaring dreams,  
lingering behind closed doors.

You were fed by us  
standing at the door, feeding deadly lies.  
We ate them, too,  
at the bedside we never saw.

Rest assured.  
We'll keep your secret behind closed doors  
because we honor silence  
that we hope is peace.  
You were never silent.  
Perhaps that told us everything.

Now the final door has opened.  
Flecks of light, bits of dust and bone,  
your death-defying act.

We stand here knowing that, knowing all,  
but say only silence,  
our speech deflected into crafted flights  
above the sea, a word or two that rhymes.  
Our words don't crack.

How like you we've become.  
You led us into imitation.  
And the more we are delivered  
to ourselves, the more you turn about us, laughing.  
Dark it is, and hollow.

Though your stone declares the grave,  
you lie anonymously in Arizona.  
Those who visit you will still be fooled,  
standing there before your name  
pronouncing it as if to meet you finally  
at the entrance.

                    You will not be found.  
You've won your silence behind closed doors.  
We cannot take that from you.  
Close the door. You will live.

### **Letting the World Be**

Is it possible that words can fix the loss of names  
and places, the locations of the heart?

Writers think they can, and so do theologians.

But then what happens when our scraps of thought  
on paper or on stone are tossed aside  
or worn away, just the way the sea  
rages naturally against rock?

What can final sand  
reveal of places we remember? It moves through fingers,  
claiming its own freedom,  
mocking us, our wish to be eternal.

Nothing in the world is ours, and so I won't arraign the  
sand.

What's lost is the memory of loss,  
the spectacular white that rides the tops of waves.  
Stone in any form goes on without us.  
It has better things to do than gesture.

**For Simon Rodia, Who Built the Watts Towers**

(for Helen Friedland and Barbara Strauss)

What can the illiterate leave behind, the immigrants  
from another land?  
The hands of this Italian tile-master break steel and  
mesh,  
mortar and colored stone, the ends of bottles, bits of  
pipe  
and shell, pink and irresistible.

The final handiwork of his anonymous life —  
three tender spires above mosaic fountains,  
the dry idea of people in an arching garden  
tomed within the play of stone.  
Only here the sun shines through the thickest glass  
and the dazzling maze is finally lifted up  
above a solitary place where Rodia labored on his  
scaffold,  
building something we'd remember.

Some say Rodia left the neighborhood because he'd  
finished building  
or because the neighborhood had changed.  
What remains in rods of high, intricate steel  
is the man who spoke to no one at 107th Street.

Rodia was discovered later living quietly in Martinez,  
California.

He only mumbled, "I no have anybody help me out,"  
when the docent from the L.A. County Art Museum  
asked him how he did it.

The Towers took Christ's life to build, three and thirty  
years.

Rodia was the plan.

The Towers built themselves.

In my eyes—I see Rodia's hand—  
these encrusted cones are still alive,  
generous and full of hope, like the wiry immigrant's  
blessing  
above the compassless city,  
the gathered trees on which the sun plays, hushed and  
free.

**I spoke to her by phone on Thursday**

after she had settled in at Berkeley East,  
just behind St. John's, that ominous name,  
where cancer patients rest before their flight.

My deflections, polite, protected us  
at our kindred distances. *I'm not that bright.*  
That's what she said.

But I remember comments, tentative, hard,  
I thought were on the mark.  
Perhaps she couldn't hear my voice  
among those who accidentally met to share books.

We were not dangerously close, knotty  
like someone in a family session,  
but touching in the way birds touch, and free,  
having landed fearlessly at a crystal lake,  
momentarily refreshed by the underground table,  
whose paths will never cross a second time,  
but from whose intuitive descent  
seeds flower, no matter where they're planted,  
where they're scattered.

**Music of the Spheres: Beethoven**

He hammered at the sounding board.  
Then cut the legs and lay on the floor,  
folding himself around the instrument,  
pulling piano strings like a prehistoric harp.

The noise would have been unbearable to us,  
the volume barely audible to him,  
and yet he saw the rise of leaves  
in the upper branches, the consequence of sound,  
and raised his head.

We speak of creation like this, sealed in bone,  
looking up words in the dictionary  
and laughing when we know the syntax.

**Mrs. Halpern & Aunt Miriam**

1.

Granny should be made of plastic.  
She probably is by now.  
Round-the-clock nurses' aides sponge her down,  
but a hose would mean a real shower.

She lies there with the bed wings up.  
Her skin and bones can't move enough.  
She keeps her time by flying,  
surviving everyone. I stand by.

2.

You simply fell asleep and dreamed  
the empty chair, looking back,  
as if you sat somewhere  
by a window before the great sea.

It returns to you, as light and wings,  
the holiness that limestone accepts,  
shimmering like the hand of the artisan  
who made this cup we ride in.

**Material Revelation**

(for Lon Engelberg)

Only one dream lives in sleep, like the Creator.  
First the womb, then the cradle,  
the psychiatric couch, then home,  
a condominium in West L.A.,  
your anonymous journey day and night like everyone.  
Your resting place—collective housing  
like New World ruins at Acoma,  
that inexhaustibly flat mountain the Indians took for earth.

There high winds, the mesa's blue,  
the color of revelation and solitary need, loosen gravity.  
Everyday rotation stops,  
and each man for himself alone falls up.

In these light-headed regions, where mind  
and thin air mix, you are an inexhaustible spider,  
webbed in your own devising, remembering your projections  
as if they came from there,  
out there, giving direction like Ariadne's thread  
from the heart of the labyrinth  
to the door, eons away.

All you know is this: that the infant held  
in his mother's hand seals a divine print,  
humans passing a light touch to the light we see.  
The rest an inarticulate memory  
of that initial bond, the idea made flesh  
which, if miraculously we're blessed,  
one of our kind will reveal in renewing waters,

like Bach's chaconne, or in a mystic's eye  
that simply knows.

The rest of us in the middle of the night  
make love as apes, hugging and breathing  
like primary species.

Could we see absorbing joy from somewhere else,  
we'd hold the flesh that binds us like a gift.  
We'd worship sounds of final animals,  
turn our planetary bed into the resting place we want;  
we'd make and remake secret icons,  
see our hands in the Creator's hand  
we crawl to nightly, a moist span.

**Breaking the Barrier**

(after Descartes)

What he said  
was only half the story.  
Not *I think*, but *I am thought*,  
and in that plunge,  
feathers streaming after him,  
he broke the surface of the lake,  
the veil he thought was thick,  
and at the bottom—water his—  
dark and strangely comforted,  
he slowed his swim to a butterfly's,  
finding the steady fountain he had sought.

To his extraordinary eye  
the water seemed illuminated,  
an infinitely melting glacier,  
having carved its place in sheer rock.

There he bathed as if in a garden,  
ruffling his coat, letting air dry wings  
for his ascent, surfacing after a time  
in no time at all.