

## *Flying at Night*

Although we are putting it off,  
the New Year is coming. Midnight  
in Times Square, the dropping  
of the electric ball, will find us,  
we hope, in Utah at ten o'clock.  
Meanwhile this hiatus—  
hours at once passing forward  
and back, and we hundred passengers,  
seeds in a tight pod.

Our pilot has flown far north  
into Canada around a storm.  
Even so, we're harrowed  
by a two-hundred-mile-an-hour headwind  
in seventy degrees below zero.  
The blackness out there  
thickens like cloth,  
far below interrupted  
by a brilliant gem—  
some city on the edge  
of one of the Great Lakes,  
the dark pool slicing away  
its patterns of light.

Then a barrage of stony air.  
The plane jolts through. Ice chinks  
in my plastic glass, and I wonder  
what friction between molecules of air  
is forming what imbalanced fields,  
and when the whole churning mass  
will spit out its electric charge.  
Air travel, someone said,  
is hours of boredom interrupted  
by moments of terror.  
This we pretend

not to know, chattering in the tight  
lozenge of our jet, hoping  
those blank square windows,  
like the calendar ahead,  
will fill with land and light.

We watch the movie, ask for complimentary  
champagne, float along in the current,  
ignorant as salmon  
the eagle has picked out.  
Is death chance, or the fact  
of the bird's eye? I tell you,  
there are forces building up.

To hike to the spires, you climb  
Over two hundred million years,  
Language and breath your sacrifice.  
This is no temple. Everything growing  
On red stone you cross, broken  
And deep, twists against light.  
Splayed and shredded juniper trunks  
Show you to adapt, so you match  
Your stride to the scars  
That split rock, the path rain  
Took down the stone face  
Into the wash. There is no water,  
Just its memory: a gouge  
In the escarpment, dry bed below.  
Ripples over sand become stone,  
Stone ripples broken like shards.  
More ruin waits for weather—  
Cloudburst, blizzard, ice.  
As you walk in this high, hot air,  
Sun sears color into cliffs, and  
Breath comes dry from your mouth.  
Silken and lush in your body, a drum  
Full and tight, water throbbing  
Inside, you are learning  
The long version of silence.  
Few things are less personal  
Than how the land needs you,  
Saliva, blood, bile.

*To a Recreational Parachutist*

*The Lord upholdeth all that fall.*

— PSALMS 145:14

1.

Humans imagined flight  
by watching birds,  
but we have seen  
ourselves fall,  
from trees, mountains,  
grace.

In one mortal winter  
twenty feet of snow  
will seal a crevasse  
till spring erodes  
the underside  
of the snowpack;  
a climber learns  
the treachery the instant  
he breaks through.  
Thus, in a lifetime  
many who don't understand  
shall fall.

2.

Like the boy, eighteen,  
who jumped where you jump,  
with Cedar Valley Freefall.  
Both his chutes opened,  
the main tangling  
the reserve,  
so he spiralled too quickly  
but not fatally  
down, till  
he released the main,  
and it, in dropping  
away, collapsed  
the reserve,  
leaving him  
five seconds,  
four hundred feet.

Had he lived,  
his instructor  
could have said,  
"This is what  
you did wrong."

3.

I can only imagine  
you up there  
in that light,  
flimsy craft  
that is mostly noise,  
caught in the whole  
human yearning  
towards what may kill us.

When they open  
the door, you refuse  
to be shattered  
by wind, already  
knowing the errors  
you can't make.  
I see you climb  
through the gap  
into full mortal risk,  
brace against the wing,  
lower yourself to hang  
from the wheel struts.

In that moment  
you drop  
through sting and thrust

to boundless, complete release.  
Silence and time.  
And what you have to do.  
And the great bloom  
of the earth, rising.

## *Freak Accident Claims Rhino*

The female rhino and her mate were  
playing in the open pen at the zoo when  
the female fell and caught her nose  
under a rock ledge and suffocated.

She blundered to her death, like a woman  
running into her husband and his lover  
in a dusky restaurant downtown.  
“David,” the woman says, “I thought  
you were going to Boulder.” She stumbles  
to their table and the truth,  
and the air escapes her  
so that she has to fall.  
The rhino’s name was Minette.  
In her brute innocence she came out  
to lumber around in the sun.  
But her bulk and her tiny brain  
behind the one horn and pig eyes  
couldn’t grasp the possibilities—  
the crack, the ledge,  
if it is there, is hidden  
and is always a surprise.  
She bumped against her mate;  
she stumbled about. Ignorant,  
she made the stupid mistake  
and rock closed over her,  
wedging her down. Extremity  
claimed her: how knowledge comes  
to the body—heave and throe,  
heave and throe.

## *Mary Keeps All These Things*

I stir the innkeeper’s sympathy  
only when my water breaks and runs  
down my leg, soaking my blue  
robe, and I have to lean  
against his shabby door;  
he looks at me through splintered eyes.

I have come down from the donkey  
in the great bell of my body,  
the weight of the child and him kicking  
inside, so the next guardian of those gates  
that open only to money, much  
more money than Joseph can pay,

will have to see me, my travail.  
My accident is not a cheat but the urgency  
of birth, and I am not ashamed. He considers,  
refusing my eyes. Beard stained with mutton  
grease, he finally says, “Stables. In the back,”  
and jerks his head to shunt us to one side.

The cave of the animals is dark  
and warm, smelling of straw, urine,  
dung. Our rushes give off  
only a smoky light. As we walk  
between the pens, our donkey follows  
under his pack, then another brays;

disturbed, the sheep baa.  
Joseph worries for me as he cleans  
a stall, spreads fresh straw  
and a blanket where I can lie.  
I am big and awkward as a camel sinking  
down. What relief, to give myself

to pain, guessing the hours these knots  
will come and go. Between them  
I feel straw prickling my hair  
and ears, scratching the back of my neck.  
Then my body clenches, legs  
and back and belly tight.

Each cramp I feel the pain can grow  
no more, O Lord, no more. And yet  
I have given my word and will  
to bring this child. My body  
opens and opens its passage between  
my womb's constraint and the chaotic

clash of life. I will, in my extremity,  
remember I have a name. Mary is  
my name. I will split open, part  
the shadow that keeps this child  
from light. He must come, is coming,  
comes. At last, his brash infant cry.

I watch Joseph clean him, bring him  
to my arms. I am seized  
by his perfection—tiny hands, clear  
unblinking eyes. This dove, this calf,  
this young and wondrous lamb squeals  
as I take him to my breast.

Tiny gums grip my nipple; he sucks  
and sucks, butting me with his insistent  
head. When the liquid comes  
into his hungry mouth, we are joined  
in ache and pleasure—circle and dance;  
I give him comfort and he gives it back.

Our small animal noises belong here  
in the shelter of the poor and dumb  
who break their bodies to sustain  
life. I have saved clean wool  
from the underbellies of the lambs,  
carded it, and spun the softest

cloth to keep him warm. Tonight  
he will sleep above us, in a manger  
of sweet hay, and we will lie down,  
our faces low upon the ground, hands  
joined, sheltered in the shadow  
of this small and brilliant life.