

## KINDLING

You gone, I thought to look  
for warmth in the pith of trees,  
so I went to the chopping-block,  
brought axe's edge to kiss  
soft, knotty-hearted pine  
whose sinews might warm mine.

Matchstick's rasp, blue chuff:  
the fine-shaved kindling caught,  
curled into twenty fists  
that cupped their fingers shut,  
till fire fastened to the wood  
and wooed it close and hot,  
and soon the room was warm enough  
but I was not.

## A BRAIDED AUBADE

Earth's brink, while we two slept  
had dark and driftily crept  
towards a jagged line  
where sea and cusping sun  
honored their daily tryst  
and hotly, coldly, kissed.

## ONCOLOGY WARD

When the man Adam had quitted God,  
"I'll turn," he said, "these lumps of sod,  
And take the even with the odd."  
But it had been for Eve (whose hand  
Had never touched a plough) to find  
A wide groomed plot and break new ground.

You and I, likewise yoked and sealed,  
Came soon to the end of the row we tilled,  
Our part in the telling all but told.  
And not sowers only, but also seed;  
So must the same bitter choice be made:  
Whether you must follow or precede?

Pale apples ripening in the grove—  
Pick one and offer it, daughter of Eve,  
In the hour of your taking leave.

## FOUR ROMAN ODES

### *i. The Consolation of Philology*

Come to console me, Romans? Such great *pals*,  
the lot of you, who swear big-talking vows  
to go with me—I quote your words—"as far  
as far-flung Bombay's breaker-beaten shore;  
whether you press beyond the Caspian Sea,  
silk-strewn and leisure-loving Araby,  
or where the Parthians wield the fluted shaft;  
thence to the shores whereon Nile's deltas heft  
all Egypt's dazzling mineral sediment.  
We'll stick by you, compadre, if you're bent  
on steeper grades: to tread the Alps' high spine,  
beyond whose precipices spreads the scene  
of conquering Caesar's best-selling *Gallic Wars*,  
and with you bide the Rhine's meandering course,  
crossing the sea to Britain's chalky bank,  
Caesar's limit and the earth's own brink.  
Ours is the power, in biting circumstance  
to speak peace to the souls of suffering friends."  
Speak, can you? Fine. Ask the lady, real nice,  
whose heart she winches in her cordial vice,  
squeezing it sapless, leaving it blue and bashed  
along with the dozen others therein lodged.  
Ask her what's left but words for the fool who looks  
for consolation in battered Latin books.  
And this little query, pithy and concise:  
how long till she orchestrates her next reprise  
that brings her all mock-penitent back here—  
as if she thought some tactic of repair,

when the passing plough, beneath the garden walls,  
grazes a rose too fragile for the shock,  
could graft the blossom to the severed stalk

after it falls.

ii. *Carta Postale*

"Dear Dr. Talbot:

Thought I'd drop a quick note.

Today we saw the Palazzo Pubblico  
Where Dante was sent to mediate  
A dispute between rival princes. It's so

Thrilling to think I stood where *he* stood!  
The frescoes are Florentine and Sienese.  
Wish I'd bucked down at Latin, and could read  
The legends on the walls and tapestries.

Take care." Signed: former Latin pupil.  
There you have it: the Dante she chose to admire  
Is the politic one: not poems but people.  
Poetic stroke of hers, to pare

Virtue down to an epigram,  
Postcard's compass, trim its edges  
To deliver its deft incision: *for shame,*  
*Dr. Talbot, that some battered text is*

*The paragon of your affections.*  
*How long will you separate life and work,*  
*Pull the two apart into tidy sections*  
*Like some pricy Caribbean fruit? If I shirked*

*Declensions and conjugations, if I can't,*  
*From these pedestals, eke out so much as one word,*  
*It's a sluggard's shadow monument*  
*To the human society I preferred.*

How long since you looked up from scrawls on rocks  
To return the frank gaze of a human face?  
Our hearts are ticking like booby-trapped clocks.  
Which will it be, Dr. Talbot: Romans or us?

iii. A Philological Crux

Loathe her, love her: while scholars wrangle *why*,  
I'm wracked between *caress* and *crucify*.

*iv. The Secret Accretions*

Ice, like the shimmering robe that blond blonde lets drop  
    To her ankles, slips from the field,  
And lets the brook break, chuckling, from its grip.  
    She can't be twenty years old,

She and her friends, sunbathing girls, who go  
    Dressed in their daring skin,  
Parading everlasting youth—or so  
    They'd have you think. Think again:

Think of how, six months hence, the last sour breath  
    Of moribund summer's breeze  
Will fail, and autumn pummel the grass beneath  
    Carpets of frost-gilded leaves.

Outside, the seasons mend such damages,  
    But not so the weather within:  
No springtime thaws your limbs, no sun assuages  
    Once winter gets under your skin.

Onto the very plot on which you'll drop  
    Your ancestors fell first,  
Who yearned for deathless things and tendered hope  
    And now are shades and dust.

Join them tomorrow? Next month? Who can tell?  
    Best live today with flair.  
The secret accretions of a life led well  
    Elude the grasping heir.

But learn good judgment now—for all your wit  
    And pedigree won't budge  
When men speak of you in the preterite  
    And you become the judged.

Stern X, for all his piety, still died,  
    Nor will ice soon release  
Y to her pleading Z, who tried  
    To rescue her. She stays.

## FORTUNE COOKIES

i

Overheard in the pew:  
*Such abrasive love*  
*In the original Hebrew!*

ii

From his lofty view  
He takes in continents  
None of which is true.

iii

Attending not to sense, but sound,  
What I never sought, you found.

iv

Downcast, I found  
Red shoots flowering  
Low to the ground.

v

Among all the voices  
I heard only echoes.  
Where were their voices?  
I only heard echoes  
Among all the voices.

vi

My other, in the mirror, felt  
The sting of self-importance when  
I came, daily, to regard him.

vii

Overheard in the pews:  
*Who could read the Bible*  
*Out of such blue eyes?*

viii

Fit these lines to the oracle's measure? OK:  
Your wake will converge like chopsticks on  
Your fleeing boat; your milky contrails will lie  
Like pick-up sticks above our heads; the cars  
Will drip through their catheters; your goings  
And comings will tell the truth about you.

ix

let us water that blossom let us bring  
the vase to overflowing can we  
drink like that cut stem