**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.

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.