

BY ROTE

(The first word of each line is capitalized as a reminder to stress it.)

Fear swamps the dark as the shifty gale floods the cowering ear.
When morning comes, robed in rose and gold, it is then
Roar of the steady Rote, far out from now dead-quiet shore,
Beach, and unbothered ledges, engulfs the air, drowning speech:
Boom, by the islanded heard every hour, even heard in the womb,
And on the death bed heard, the war of water and land,
Howl of high seas and strong past understanding, their growl
Thunder of great storms over, still well remembered under,
In the depths, the awful, the unremitting din,
Grinding upon the unseen edge of the continent, minding
Two things at once, the solid order, and out of the blue
Strife of attack and resistance, of matter and form, of life.
Voice of the planet, singing in parts, will still rejoice
Playing the oldest notes, its atonal strain and swaying
Strings that tie the troubled earth to its troubles. It sings
Collisions of worlds that remain unchanged by its divisions,
Producing nothing but energy itself, reducing
Sense of its universal world to its violence,
Mirth of unspeakable power of water, endurance of earth –
Art, but sung not sweetly, that it has learned by heart.
Voice is the message, out of the deep, a calling voice.

NORTH BY EAST

The lushness of the north Pacific West,
rocked by cataclysm, sapped by rot,
mildly depresses me. It may attest
to the passing of places, or to our own lot
as tender, decaying flesh. I'd rather sing
where gusts of windflowers blow through the woods in spring,
this glacial place of ledgy granite leas
and rills of bloom streaming to the sea –
to swim with seals and sleep on the balsam floor
of the deep and fragrant forest, for company
the towering boulders slumbering under fabulous stars.

**ON FIRST LOOKING INTO A PHOTOGRAPH OF "THE ENGLISH"
(by Ian Berry, sponsored by the Arts Council, 1974)**

There will always be an England,
but not for me. Take this upland,
where one exclusive group trails down,
their inward-turning thoughts their own.
Another, equally discrete,
seated silent as tableau,
gazes on their place below,
its mills and spires and terraced streets.

Girded with tweed caps or frocks
blotched with homely blossoms, proof
not of promises of bloom
but of promise to conform,
still from my longing they must turn.
My sacrifices merely mock.

PETIT RONDEAU FOR A PETITE WIDOW
(However, my arachniphobia remains unchanged)

Take back your life, little ebony miss;
to take up my fire without care was remiss.
I saw through the glass as the log fire threw
its smoke and flame until it drew
you out of hibernation's bliss
in your perfectly crafted dome. You knew
your peril, quick-sifted every clue
as you wove artful paths through hell's abyss.

Take back your life.

To the crack in the door, unerring you flew
this way and that, under fire dead true.
I raised my shoe to your mortal kiss –
but I couldn't have done what you did, not this.
Courageous and clever, for your vertu,

Take back your life.

SARAH
(for my late mother-in-law)

No one knew in her long life in Brooklyn,
even her family did not know,
that Sarah kept an elegant brand of Russian
under a litter of broken tongues.

For her reward, the Yenta's clownish role
and bondage to the scornful inlaws
crowned the youthful years of flight alone,
all Europe baying at her backside.

Sarah's daughter suffered, naturally,
shamed when Mommy bribed the nurse
to take good care of her man, as in old Russia.
But it worked! The nurses *loved*

the money and the costly chocolates.
When Sarah sickened, no one bribed the nurses.

SPACE INVADERS
(My place exhales the human past.)

Like dykes of marble shot through molten rock,
bits of human habitat break through.
Take the island tower that rules my view.
 Now no one comes to set the weight
 that could cause the bell to speak.
None has come since underwater line
 powered us out of that lost time.

Or take the old abandoned granite quarries
with their towering piles, limestone quarries
with their kilns, squat mossy ovens greening
 after centuries of quiet.
 They appear and startle by it,
between the chain stores and the condo blocks:
 old truths in search of newer meaning.

The lush banks of the mighty Kennebec
curve away into the past to where
by indirections just around the bend
 Arnold still leads the damned astray.
 At vanishing point, the past is there
and ghosts like extinct species paddle away,
 rowing like Sisyphus, just out of sight.

THE APOSTASY

“A woman should aspire to be never spoken of, one way or the other.”

Pericles of Athens

“Unless one becomes as a rogue, one will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Emily Dickinson

I

Honest Emily cried out –
Ever – against the Veil.
Naked and unafraid before
Powers that Prevail –

“Chilled and burned” by her own words –
She slipped the fist of the Father –
He who had her mind examined
For Falsehood – by their rector.

Did her pastor pity the girl—
Shocked by the Old Man’s wrongs?
Or did she merrily show to him
Only her prettiest songs?

Her father never could drive her mad
With Shame, Remorse, Self-loathing—
Her joys never those of picking a sore –
So her Silence gave both something.

II

Writing fairly as a critic, Updike understood
how if Wharton’s father and her marriage had survived,
the dues of social membership, correct-think and good manners,
would have drained away the ample riches of her mind.

III

Leonard and Virginia taking tea
in the Garden of War, as leaves of their ornamentals
burst, the bullets pinging like heavy rain,
baby-hating Leonard, proud as ever
of that indifference which passed with him
for courage, that self-importance which passed with him

for judgment, and do we believe that man would stay
to die with his wife once the fumes had stilled her,
someone like him,, keeping the gas tank full
because in a day or so the Germans would come,
so that great soul descended into the river,
imploding to inner depths where her woman's self
lay folded, sinking in where the meanings are,
taking the one choice left to her as a wife,
to the girl she was, allowed to read only the Bible,
but living to coolly drop her learned father
into a footnote and to get her vision
like Little Lily Briscoe and other personae,
for whom to live was seeking truth as oneself,
as others had done "in unknown company,"
even as the great, who saw that truth
was beauty, beauty truth, or saw in Irish
uprising after eight hundred years of oppression,
"a terrible beauty," to grasp again and again,
"the power of taking hold of experience,
of turning it round slowly in the light,"
like a kaleidoscope, or the moments when
time, becalmed, will luff against the mast.

IV

A living author feared to lose her people,
should her work betray she minded
wearing the hand-me-downs of conscious virtue
to seventh grade in a Southern town;

she gifted her discontents to the unlettered
daughters of altogether other mountains.

The Fly, the Rat, and the Bull

I was the one who arranged the curl
of amber fly paper. I'm the girl,
the one with the amber curls. But see,
its MY place, no flies allowed! Impearled
in compelling honey, from a swirl
of gold a quiet fly sights me –
and only then he struggles, awirl
with frantic cries for help, to his girl,
his hangman and hopeless hope, helpless to help as he.

Black death, they say, was borne by the flea,
plaguing the rat. But take it from me
life with rats would never do,
for all sorts of reasons. SEE
the damage to the cupboards! Debris
all over, I cry war and strew
my poison all over, feeling freed
by demon reason to kill. It's plea
in its eyes and blood on its lips, it falls at my feet – my coup.

The bull in his dark, filthy stall always knew
when anyone passed on the road. He threw
himself at his quaking walls and hurled
his baffled body, roaring, true
to his fearful reputation. BOO!
As children, we flew past the monstrous churl
heart battering ribcage. Did he pursue
us howling for company as he flew –
Or had desperation turned to rage as it unfurled?

THE ICE STORM
(for Wendy, horse whisperer)

My husband always used to say
 our pets thought we were God.
Since then, I chose a country way
 and ate by breaking sod.

My horse was always kept unshod,
 and on a winter day
I saw him fake a fine glissade
 in stiff-legged disarray.
His horror as he coursed away
 in four directions came
on the wind to me in a desperate neigh
 and sent me scrambling, lame,

over the ice for ash to tame
 the runaway rebel earth.
The path to the barn I ashed was the same
 as before I sanded its girth.

But the way he looked at me, the birth
 of worship in his face!
“You threw magic dust at the earth
 and made it a blessed place

for horses once again.” To pace
 the world with your gods and know
them well must be a life of grace –
 and wonder, sure how you go.

THE PAINTED LADY

Not the homely Bridgeport triple-decker,
like so many still surviving,
where incubated my elemental father
in a shoebox on the oven door,

this perfection as of a stranded shell,
this proud Victorian dowager,
her fancy porches ready for nobs to call,
she sails her gables, elegant, tall.

So recently esteemed, her colors are bright,
she glows, her gingerbread in trim,
a splendid magic castle full of light.
No street survives, no path to her gate.

She seems an apparition, rising high
from a blackened wasteland, deeply poisoned.
This is home to pylons, high voltage lines
and overpasses, crossed by tracks

as far as the eye can see, but none connect
to her and no one will come again.
It would be death to tread that field of black,
corrosive sponge. Should you evade

electrocution among these rails and switches,
the chemical soil would burn away
your boots, your clothes, your skin to patches.
This polluted ground can never

harbor life again. The very sight
breeds the black despair that seeps
in at the eyeholes. Now they have decided
it is time for her to leave.

They have opened her windows to the influx,
summoning in the outside to kill her.
Healthy and beautiful, she gets the push
for being useless to her place:

a vast industrial pit of stunning filth
and danger. Her world has moved away.

THOUGHTS OF HOME AND FAMILY

When we need to, we always think of home,
even if it is no longer there
or never was. These worlds we make go on
and spread an afterlife on the vibrant air.
Our distance from the dead is wider than
any worldly distance, yet its span
is crossed by a memory, a thought, a fear.

ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS ONE

When women were not allowed to sing,
even in church that rein,
the voices of castrati would ring
through Papal States and stain
those hallowed rooms, those sacred halls,
with dark, hopeless sorrow, doubly cruel:
to expend two voices to make one whole.

