

The Apprentice

I was a hungry infant carried in a soldier's pocket.
He used to stroke my little head for luck.

In the city, we saw a wagonload of cheese.
All the people stood silent as it passed,
because it was meant for the royal family
and it was poisoned.
The soldier's rough thumb
squeezed my ear so hard that day
I cackled like the trees do back home,
before winter catches them.

After that, we killed many people
and the taverns shut down until we were caught.
My protector was hanged
and I wept, swinging
in the hammock of his stiff fingers.
An old hen called up to me, seeming
to make polite apologies,
but really she wanted to see me up close;
the innocent foundling.
I saw the shadow of a boot pass over her,
then swing away again.

Rattling By

Dead men go along the road
in twos and threes,
waving goodbye with their toes.

The scaffold folds into a suitcase!
“Will wonders ever cease?” we ask,
and the hangman, who is blind,
kindly and rich says, “Yes.”

Heaven

We have heard stories of Jesuits
being flayed, their hearts eaten.
We see smoke above the trees sometimes.

God gives no rebuke,
the tent preachers say,
because to him we are the sweetest song.
But a saint came through last week,
just a few dry sticks in a cloak.
He had no head!

Where are the torches on the fishing boats,
where is the singing, the women
lying down in ploughed fields to count sheep?
Even the clouds move higher and higher,
as if something up there has withered.

As usual, it is dark among the pews.
No one makes demands of the little
unpainted Madonna. No one knocks on her door.

Unpleasant Coincidence

It's night in Unpleasant Coincidence.
An eclipse yet.

We leave the rain-soaked horses in the hotel bar
which has no roof, no walls, no bar.

Women are everywhere in lighted tents,
their heads making fists of shadow.
But because I am dressed like a man,
I must stand out here and wallow in my success.

The galaxies spin overhead, getting a bead on us all.
We pray for food and a terrified bird
falls into our hands. I get the feet.

“Let's go,” says my chorus of lice.
“Let's get out of here.”
But that's what they said last time,
and now look where we are.

Husband

I descend by moonlight onto the plain.
Wolves have left rivers in the grass
which I follow until the town
sits up out of the earth.
Wet smell from the corral . . .
horses avoid me, shouldering each other along,
a hushed parade.
I float in the dark.

I want a husband.
It is a slow search, but pleasant.
Windows pass like clouds
until I catch a ride on one, bend through
to look down at a bed.
“No,” says my nose,
but I crawl in to see anyway.

Weeks pass in the tavern before he is missed,
and in the field, boys step in patiently
and take up his work.

Rest

The crow is a creature of many mysteries.
For instance he has two hearts,
one inert inside the other.
He brings darkness with him, sure,
but also glittering things.
In the sun, he looks like a crumb
from the deepest cave, and if the clouds sink low,
his shiny black head is a star, brighter and brighter.
Sleep never comes to this creature.
He closes his disc eyes and yearns for rest.

Seasons spin in their sockets,
winter falls off its shelf with a whoop,
the mouse of the field goes home.
And yet, all down the road,
dutiful fenceposts yawn a little,
strangely restless in their shallow beds.

My Travels

He has run away,
so I must apprehend him,
though I know it will take forever.

I sleep naked under bridges.
In the morning I put on my pillow of clothes.

Once, I think I see him hanged in a tree,
but it is a woman instead,
shoulders swelling from her rotten uniform.
I step forward and take her fallen hat.

Sparrows rise from fields,
convulse in the dry road and fly off,
dust memorizing each little shrug.
Sparrows scrounge in my hair
for small, useful things.

At night, I hear him walking,
the clink of leg irons through ditch water.
Stars gaze down at me where I lie
in the fog, clutching the coins he drops,
his bottles and leather pouches,
his ruined glass eye.
The heavens see through my lies,
through the coat and decayed shirt,
to all his gorgeous cuts and bites.

Little birds cry out, bolt to the river
and settle on any floating body
to watch the moon spin round.

Rain

All day it rains and the trees bend low
over the river.

Floating like light bulbs in the murky water
are all my various children.

They have been out all night
in long white nightgowns.

I reach to where the smaller ones
spin in the shallows.

I tell myself they are cute,
but, in truth, they are all imbeciles:
reckless, missing fingers, missing eyes,
bit by horses, bit by snakes and gone wild on venom,
fans of blood.

The baby closest to me
thinks he's playing songs from the old country
on a reed. The rain drools down his cheeks.
"Wait a minute," I say. "That reed's not hollow,"
and I wade toward him,
sinking deeper, my arms above me in worship.

He keeps on piping till I am gone.
After a while, the rest of them join in.