

## THE STATION

I hear it first as the rustle  
of dead leaves, spines knocking  
softly against spines, and the deep  
rumble and purr of the engine  
that sends pips spiraling up  
through our glasses, makes the legs  
of our thin woven chairs tremble  
in the Paris heat, then the scream  
of wheels shooting arcs  
of blue fire and you're grabbing  
your cardboard suitcase,  
your wilted plastic bag,  
your book, your ticket, your hat  
you're running down the track,  
you're leaping onto the silver  
ascending steps, you're swinging  
up and on board.

In my memory  
you turn to look back at me.  
But that is not what happened.

## HOW TO ARM A TEACHER

First  
think carefully  
about exactly what  
you should arm them  
with  
what  
should it look like  
cause after all  
your sons and daughters  
are right there  
right  
in front of them  
pencils ready  
sitting quietly  
or not quietly  
at their tables  
at their desks  
in the classroom  
in the cafeteria  
on the bleachers  
and surely  
with their young  
sharp eyes  
they are first  
to spot  
precisely  
what that teacher  
is carrying  
so watch out  
arm a teacher  
with the ability  
to understand  
that kid  
with his feet kicked out  
and his head on his desk  
got nothing to eat  
this morning  
and that kid  
wearing long sleeves  
on a hot  
summer day

is hiding lines  
of cuts  
like bar codes  
on her wrists  
arm a teacher  
with the vision  
to make words  
come to life  
for those kids  
who can't read  
who speak English  
as a second language  
whose parents  
have never  
read to them  
who don't  
have parents  
to read to them  
arm a teacher  
with the grit  
to get through  
another day another class another meeting another test  
and remember  
that everything  
a teacher is armed with  
they pass to their students  
everything  
so  
you choose  
you choose  
you choose  
what do you want to see  
in your child's hands?

## **FACES IN THE STREET**

He told you, the water in Paris  
is poison, in the street  
robots are marching  
over cobblestones, cutting me  
with their sharp faces. Please  
take your roses and go. For years  
you saw him everywhere, bending  
back the pages of a paper in the heat  
of Union Square, ordering waffles  
in a truck stop on a dusty gold  
West Virginia morning, slipping books  
under his coat in the London rain.  
Then we climbed onto a crimson  
steam train, tumbled out, strode up  
the pass, our breath a trail  
of pale globes, and at the summit  
there he was, twirling tines  
in a cauldron of fondue, gulping tea  
from an eggshell cup. You hid  
your bright hair but he knew us,  
he came over, he sat down,  
he took bread from our table, he said,  
Where have you been?

## TREE OF LIFE

Ritter's Diner is an unlikely location for anything  
to take place, but I was there  
at four years old, eating buckwheat pancakes.  
At nine, my mother drunk, sharing a cheap plate  
of spaghetti before weaving back  
to an unheated apartment. At twenty-six, kissed  
secretly by the bathroom. At twenty-nine, receiving  
my great-grandmother's opal engagement ring.  
("Don't take it unless you want to court tragedy," said my uncle.)  
At forty-two, waiting to be told if my father would live  
as he muttered to himself and tore apart scraps of paper  
down the street in Shadyside Hospital.  
And here we are now: Katie and Angie, Kate and Angela,  
I see your faces as I remember them at seventeen,  
ardent and shy, your sudden laughter, our late talks,  
the sketchbooks where you brought dreams to life —  
do you remember yourselves as I remember you?

My uncle remembers me and does not remember me.  
He who taught silent children to sing  
gets up to wash his hands seven times  
in ten minutes. He eats honeydew, forgets  
the purpose of a fork: something vague  
and silver. Behind his head, a pencil sketch  
of my grandmother. Is that Mum, I say,  
the name everyone had for her. Yes, he says.  
My own mother is dead or not dead. Sis.

My sister is dead, her ashes buried  
in the back yard. I dug the hole in cold clay.  
*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam*  
Dan prayed as I scattered the first handful of ashes  
and they turned to stars in the wind. Dan, sitting on the hospital bed  
next to my father, holding his hand, gazing  
out the window at the falling snow. Dan, shot eight months later  
at Tree of Life. Dan, lying on the floor amongst  
the dead, grabbing an EMT's ankle. Against all odds  
we are walking through Shadyside, we are sitting  
at a cast iron table, we are toasting  
to life, to health. Later I walk  
with Mike, his daughter Annika the age

I was when I used to wander Walnut Street  
on my own while my mother worked. I knew  
every item in every store, every side street,  
but I cannot explain my life then: the night buses,  
the food pantries, the secondhand clothes,  
the cigarettes and broken glass. Annika runs  
in front of us with none of the caution  
of a city kid, and may she never need it.

What we need and do not have  
we do without. My last night in Pittsburgh  
I see myself at seven,  
at fourteen, at thirty. I am a stranger  
in town these days and now  
I'm flying from place to place,  
person to person, conversation  
to conversation, but soon  
I will return to empty rooms.  
Already, I hear the echo.

*Where is the echoing room where we whispered  
at midnight, naked, drinking blackcurrant wine  
from jam jars? We opened French windows  
to let in the the moon. Remember?*

The moon is heavier than I remember:  
Bigelow Boulevard, black ink. In dreams I walk  
this stretch of road in Pittsburgh winter,  
plastic bags and frozen leaves dancing  
their skeletal fury. Years ago  
something happened to me here. I remember  
the dirty pink coat I wore, a white flash  
of light, and nothing more.

Nothing more than this: a voice  
calls to me, the same voice  
that used to say my name just  
as I was drifting off to sleep  
in my single bed on North St. Clair Street.  
*There are no answers here,*  
it says. And I knew it, have known it,  
even as I search the faces before me,

even as I find an old love letter that says  
*Nothing is real until I tell it to you*  
even as I stop before the gothic stones  
of the museum. Stones, old friends,  
you have watched me at four, at twenty.  
You have borne witness to my story  
and you see what I have become.

What has become of us all?  
You are so beautiful and marked.  
You are so luminous and sad.

At Ritter's Diner, there are jukeboxes  
at every table. Here are two quarters.  
Please. Pick a song. Stay with me.  
Nothing is real until I tell it to you.

## THE DEAD PRAY FOR US

Savai'i, Western Samoa

*The landscape changed: the villages remained the same. You think: I've been here before. --Paul Theroux*

It was as far as I'd been. The underwater caves  
to the sea, the entrance for the gods running  
beneath the stretch of pale sand. The dead,  
they told me, walked on the brief shining  
path of the sun on the sea at dusk, their last  
moment between two worlds. Another,  
that day. A murder on the island. A gunshot.  
One family kneeling in front of the other  
family's hut, surrounded by their gold  
woven mats, their mulberry bark, begging  
forgiveness.

Women in bright cloth lined the roads,  
holding knives, fingering machetes, their sharp  
faces carved into lines of grief. Heat rose  
and shuddered on all sides. I drove in a dream  
through spirals of fire, steered the car  
between a burning tractor and a burning hut,  
flames cracking the sky.

They said, Your presence has brought shame  
upon the island, we are afraid  
of what you will tell the world. But when  
do any of us stand before darkening  
water and ask for forgiveness? The dead  
hesitate on the waves, look back and search  
our faces, whisper final prayers  
that settle around us  
like twilight, like love.