"A Hyphenated Poet":

An Interview with Shirley Kaufman

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Lisa Katz recently completed her doctoral dissertation on the poetry of Sylvia Plath at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she teaches. Her poetry appears in *Reading Room/3, Leviathan Quarterly 2 & 3* (England) and the *Mississippi Review Prize Issue 2001*; her translations from the Hebrew have appeared in *The New Yorker, Jubilat* and other magazines. The interview with Shirley Kaufman was conducted in August 2001 in her apartment in the Rehavia neighborhood of Jerusalem. Kaufman was joined by Eynel Wardi, lecturer in English at Hebrew University.

Shirley Kaufman's earliest collection of poems, *The Floor Keeps Turning,* won the first-book award of the International Poetry Forum in 1969, when she was 46. Since then, six more volumes of her poems have appeared, the most recent, *Roots in the Air*, bearing a title that reflects Kaufman's move from California to Israel in 1973. A selection of her poems translated by Claude Vigée into French—*Racines dans l'air*—is forthcoming in the fall from Cheyne éditeur/Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Her newest book, *Threshold,* from which selections appear below, will be published by Copper Canyon Press in 2003.

Among Kaufman's honors are fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. In addition to her own writing, she has translated books of contemporary Hebrew poetry, by Abba Kovner and Amir Gilboa, and collaborated with Judith Herzberg on the translation of Herzberg's Dutch poems, *But What: Selected Poems,* a book which won the Columbia University Translation prize. She recently co-

edited *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present*. Her latest book of translations from the Hebrew is *The Flower of Anarchy: Selected Poems of Meir Wieseltier* (University of California Press, 2002).

It is easy to imagine how any artist might be influenced by living in a place where an extreme, bright light is intensified by the white stone buildings most months of the year, and the light and stone of Jerusalem have a prominent place in Kaufman's work. It has been said that her "great subject is dichotomy," and, indeed, when Kaufman walks over her doorstep, she places herself on the verge of many sharp divides. She lives in a city which, officially or not, is multi-partite. It is just a short distance from dignified and leafy Rashba Street where Kaufman lives, a fairly secular enclave, to—if she goes this way—the dusty alleys of the walled Old City, and the contended holy places, and to Palestinian east Jerusalem outside the walls, and—if she goes that way—to teeming ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods, and to the noisy arguments taking place in the Knesset; it is also just a short drive to the forest, and to the exit to the highway, and less than an hour to Tel Aviv, a brash new city.

Kaufman has brought her American education to the Middle East, reading her adopted and troubled hometown of Jerusalem in light of Thoreau:

> *Sometimes, writing, I watch the words grow heavy*
> *when I place them in rows on the page.*
> Deliver me from a city built on the site of a more ancient city
> whose materials are ruins, whose gardens are cemeteries.
> *Whose people are desperate in their claims.*
>
> **Sanctum**

In her new poem cycle "Threshold," Kaufman uses highly restrained language to write the poetry of a private life permeated by public life, in which one hears Israeli parliamentary debate over the Palestinian intifada, and an ominous body count, in the sounds of the birds in the trees:

No rain yet

good news doesn't come
through the window

but the jacaranda
is more ferny than ever
filling

with so many birds
I don't know the names of

emergency cabinet meeting
a little too noisy
in the branches
a little too
philosophical

like in my beginning (twitter)
is my end

the birds are not
killing and dying

slightly unruly
they dive for my bread

their tiny heads dart
forward
and back
like Indian dancers
without any necks

a white-faced jay I think
it's a jay
calls

count the dead
count the dead

October 23, 2000

The Interview

The portrait that emerges below is of a poet with an acute awareness of the past and the present, both in regard to literary tradition and to the individual's place in history. I first asked Kaufman if she would talk about the genesis of her new work. Her answer was surprising.

What is the source of these poems, with their word pictures of human relations, landscape and Israeli politics? "You have to begin/with the word itself" is the way the first poem opens.

I really started this sequence by waking up one day with the word "threshold" in my head, and the sound of the word in my mind was overwhelming, without my saying it out loud. I don't think I can remember an experience quite like that. I make light of mystical experiences but I guess this was sort of like that. I went to the computer and I never compose my first drafts on the computer. I usually write until I make so many corrections that I can't read my handwriting, and I begin to find a sense of where the lines are breaking. The line breaks came just as I was breathing and I didn't think about them anymore, I just felt my intakes of breath, a way I had worked early in my career.

I decided to keep a journal of the millennium year, with all the poems loosely related to the idea of threshold as a place, but I only started in May [2000] so the first poem is somewhat explanatory.

In these poems, every line break is its own threshold. The short lines, the empty spaces on the page, the lack of punctuation; it's almost as if you were eluding expression, or comprehension. Why are you working in this form?

It felt right for this poem, and released me into earlier forms I had used. I think my poetry was much freer, more surreal and imagistic when I

first started writing—for me, it was like diving into a deep lake, and suddenly discovering I could swim.

My contemporary poetry education began in San Francisco in the fifties and sixties. Reading not only the poems, but writings about their poetry by Pound, Williams, the Objectivists (Oppen, Zukofsky, etc.), Duncan (who was my teacher in the MA program at San Francisco State University), Levertov, Olson and Snyder—formed me—together with a lot more—the lyricism and rich greenhouse and family recall of Roethke, the brilliant surreal imagery of Lorca and Neruda, the power of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. All that music has lasted in me—along with the earlier poets I loved (I won't go too far back), like Keats, Hopkins, Whitman, and Stevens too, and especially the Greek poets like Seferis—and really shaped my way of thinking about and writing poetry.

It was Robert Creeley who first said that form "is an extension of content." I heard him say it in San Francisco. And Olson took this line up again in his famous essay: "Projective Verse," in which he talked about breath and about "composition by field." What excited me about "Threshold," when I first started putting the words down as they came to me, was that I seemed to be getting back to my Williams, Olson, Oppen roots—and then I read them again—Olson's "Kingfisher," for example, and Oppen's book *Of Being Numerous*, and his later poems, his last almost incoherent poems. This renewed reading lifted me off the chair—as it had in the beginning—and that's the direction I moved in through the whole "Threshold" sequence—but much less freely than I would have liked, because I carry a lot of baggage with me now and you can't really turn the clock back.

Oppen said in an interview in 1968: "The meaning of a poem is in the cadences and the shape of the lines and the pulse of the thought which is given by those lines. The meaning of many lines will be changed—one's understanding of the lines will be altered—if one changes the line-ending. It's not just the line-ending as punctuation but as separating the connections of the progression of thought in such a way that understanding of the line would be changed if one altered the line division. And I don't mean just a substitute for a comma; I mean with which phrase the word is most intimately connected—that kind of thing." Yes!

In your 1998 interview with Chana Bloch you say that you want to write more "disjunctively." In another section of your new book, you have a line, "There is absence, unreadable."

That line speaks about one of the most painful losses I've experienced since I've been in Israel. The daughter of very close friends was blown up in a suicide attack on a bus in Jerusalem in 1995. She was also the best friend of my eldest daughter. That poem took a long time to write, years, I

wrote pages that were unreadable, unsayable... I wrote so much that I didn't want to share with anybody else, I thought there's no way to say this without oversaying.

But I think I'm following a line now that started, for me, with George Oppen. He was probably my closest poet friend and mentor during the years when I first began seriously writing in SF, and though he wasn't a teacher at San Francisco State, where I took a degree in Creative Writing, I thought of him as my "guide to the perplexed," and I used to visit with him and his wife Mary very often. I admired his use of space and careful placement of words on the page, and I think his influence is surfacing now in the "Threshold" poems. After writing a few of these poems I felt a need to read Oppen again, after some years, and I saw that his arrangement of words on the page had much to do with the form of my new work.

I read the line from the outside as unreadability in terms of the limits on what you can say and what you can understand. What I'm asking you now is how important is form to the poet, consciousness of form?

I can only speak for myself. I've loved poetry for so long, in every form, written some villanelles, sestinas and sonnets, and a few poems that didn't turn out too badly in rhymed quatrains. Yet the form that attracted me when I discovered the moderns was open and free. I always went back and forth in my writing. Some of it is completely free verse without even counting the measures, just listening to the music in my head, but I often discover a pattern of rhythm, so that I count the beats of each line, and then group the lines into four or five beat stanzas. The form is always related to the content, to the sound, meaning, emphasis of the words.

Wardi: The poem that comes to my mind in the new book is the one about anger, and the way in which the form in this poem imitates the spilt milk of anger while containing it. The anger is contained in the metaphor of the milk that won't be contained (the bottle explodes) and spills over and down the stairs and also down the lines of the poem, till it exhausts itself. On the way there (down the stairs/lines) there is another metaphorical transference of the anger—to the smothered cat that wasn't really smothered but only taken to hide with under the blanket, which soon becomes evident after the anger is given vent by this violent image. In other words, what you do with form, which I find so interesting, is that it both contains content and lets the content express itself by spilling over, as it were, to determine the form.

The trouble with anger
or with hate
is that they spill all over

won't
be contained
all over the threshold
and down the stairs

delivered in bottles
it was the milk
exploded

they sent me to get it
cold
and slippery
over my Dr. Dentons

onto the hard porch

tiny slivers
of glass
and milk

like foam sloshing out of
my father's beer
all over
the table

I wanted to lick it
like my cat

maybe I'd bleed to death
and they'd be sorry

but then
I smothered my cat
at least I took it to bed
and hid with it
under the blanket

and that's what they told me

hated cats
after

because I couldn't
hate
them

July 1, 2000

Because all literature, personal though it may be, exists in a context which is historical, and part of your context is Jerusalem, your poems are sprinkled with stones (even Prof. Edward Said throwing stones), borders, anger, the current intifada. This isn't new for you. A critic has noted that in "His Wife," the first poem in your first book, you "[bear] historical witness" –to Hiroshima and the napalming of Vietnam –while ostensibly writing a description of Lot's wife. But your poetry is quiet rather than strident; these historical references are modestly made. How important is history to you as a writer? What is the role of history in the poetry you admire?

Place and history have become more central to my work with every book. At first personal history and the ancient stories of biblical history mattered most. Family has always been at the heart of my writing, family as a continuum—myself in relation to grandparents, parents, and daughters. Also two husbands. The Holocaust first and foremost, World War II, the Vietnam War, visits to Europe and Israel, and later India and Japan, and my relocation in Israel in 1973, sharpened my awareness of place and the historical and political landscape of my time, my life as a Jewish woman. I needed to write more about life outside myself and my family circles, about what I was witnessing daily in the distressing and complicated struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, the corruption of religion, the injustice and hypocrisy of most of the world, our vulnerability on this earth.

The poetry that attracts me most is written by eastern Europeans, Asians, Latin Americans, and a few Americans who have been trying to come to terms with the great losses, suffering and inhumanity of our time. With anger or irony, often with great humor and tenderness. How do we stay human, go on loving, even enjoy our rocky lives as sentient writers? These days I'm sustained by poets like Szymborska, A.R. Ammons, Charles Wright, Adrienne Rich, Neruda, Yanis Ritsos, Yehuda Amichai, and Basho, Li Po, Tu Fu. Their poems are intensely personal and intensely alive with history.

You've written beautifully about being an American-Israeli:

"[Perhaps] the best way to describe my condition is hyphenated*, American* hyphen *Israeli, a title by which I am frequently introduced. When I look at this hyphen—the little horizontal line between American and Israeli that substitutes for "and" or "and/or"—something hallucinatory happens. I watch the line become a bridge suspended in air. And I am on it, running back and forth, which is my existential condition . . .*
I am looking at that hyphen—my hyphen—harder. The little line that has become a bridge between America and Israel has begun to sway and

swing like the Golden Gate Bridge, suspended on cables between San Francisco and Marin County, and even though the wind is strong coming in from the ocean and over the bay, I begin to find my balance on it. I discover that, after all, it does connect me... I am learning to make a virtue of it."[1]

What are the differences between the two cultures as expressed in poetry? How American is your poetry? How Israeli?

That's very hard to judge. I mean the idea of the bridge came to me rather late, after I'd lived here for more than 20 years. I used to wallow in feeling disconnected, and feeling that I wasn't at home anyplace anymore. I don't know how it was possible for me to see that in a new light. But I think it took a lot of living to realize that actually it was a strength and not a weakness, that I wasn't as dislocated as I kept insisting I was, that the fact that I was going on writing and creating and enjoying the emotional and mental stimulation of so many cultures and places was more positive than I'd thought. It became clear to me that wherever I was, the central core of me managed to stay centered and keep taking in stimuli and keep putting words down. So that staring one day at an invitation promoting an American-Israeli poet giving a reading someplace in the USA—

That was you.

Yes! I realized that the hyphen meant more than two separate identities. Even though sometimes I still feel the separation strongly, when I've just re-entered California or just come back to Israel.

About what's American and what's Israeli—there's too much overlap to differentiate. I'm very much influenced by American poets whom I grew with and grew from; I think that my way of writing is strongly influenced by a number of American poets, beginning with Whitman. That's a big part of my heritage, but I also read extensively in translation—Israeli and world poets, and while I don't think they've influenced the way I put words down on the page, they've enriched the content of my work, just as the historical and troubled place I live in has enriched my work.

Even before you arrived in Israel, you translated Israeli poets into English, with the help of Hebrew speaking writers and poets, and you have continued to do that over the thirty years you've been here. You've recently been deeply involved in two large translation

1. Shirley Kaufman, "Roots in the Air," *Judaism* 47.2 (Spring 1998): 165-66.

projects—as English language editor of a book of translations of Hebrew women's poetry, and as translator of the selected poems of Israel Prize winner Meir Wieseltier. You've also translated Judith Herzberg from the Dutch. Tell me, how does the translation process affect your own work?

For me, the process of translation started with Abba Kovner, one of the great Holocaust poets. Until then, I had never encountered that experience so intimately. He was a partisan in the Vilna ghetto and writes powerfully about his own life and the life of those terrible years. His experiences are unsayable, unreadable, he can't get it all out, especially in *A Canopy in the Desert*, in which, after the Six Day War, he combines that experience with his memories of the Vilna ghetto. That kind of blending and assimilating of the past into the present with almost hallucinatory imagery had a big influence on me, and also his accumulation of associative memory in long, nearly book-length poems.

To Plant in Shifting Sand

(By Abba Kovner, translated from Hebrew by Shirley Kaufman)

And not ask
how. Will it blossom
will it bud? When

will groundwater touch the blood
of the single balloon
full of tears

—buy! Since the day has come the day
has come! And they are transparent. They are light
and not yet ripe

—for a quarter! Very first flowers from the King's garden
two for a quarter
buy balloons for planting
the Arbor Day of Sand!

The child is dead.
I am going to him
and he will not come back to me again.

from A Canopy in the Desert

Is assimilating the past into the present characteristic of Israeli poetry, do you think, or European?

Yes, more than American. I read a lot of Russian and Polish poetry in translation. And especially Greek poetry. The poet that influenced me greatly when I was writing in SF, before I encountered Kovner, was Seferis. The past is always in his poems.

The recent past or the classical Greek past?

Both, for Seferis it was the Greek past and the world war and the present, churning together.

The Bible is the Greek myth of Israeli poetry.

Not exactly. With Kovner, I began to use a Biblical concordance while translating and I learned that I have to do that with every Hebrew poet, because biblical phrases are an everyday part of the Hebrew language today.

It's inside the language.

Yes. It helps to know the biblical content because the content arouses the associations in the first place.

In fact, it's problematic in Israeli poetry translated into English—connotations are lost; people simply don't know.

Well, you try somehow to catch them by using the King James translation which maybe some people still know, but it doesn't always work. Wieseltier uses biblical references throughout his work. Sometimes I've added a note, but much of this is lost.

I'm amazed at the way you manage not to make a poet as different from you as Wieseltier—he's more wordy, more cognitive let's say, less discreet, he makes a lot more statements—sound like you in English. How do you avoid that?

I couldn't make him sound like me. People speak of that danger. I just can't imagine how I could. Because I take the poem on the page as it is. Of course the word order changes so much, in translation from Hebrew to English that I suppose translations could come out in my own voice. But given his emotional drive and his personal history, and his unique use of Hebrew, I don't see how I could possibly make Wieseltier sound like me.

You're a kind of ventriloquist. Now I want to ask you the reverse question. Do you see yourself influencing the poets you translate? Perhaps in The Defiant Muse*?*

It's always a problem of interpretation. I think it's an absolute must in translation that the translator keep the intention of the poet. If the poet is dead and there are critics who say it means one thing and critics who say it means another, then you might have more choice. I've worked nearly entirely with living poets I could talk to about what they really meant. Kovner was very elusive—he didn't want to spell it out—but Judith Herzberg wanted me to get every nuance of her meaning though I don't know Dutch. With Wieseltier, it was important to get the precise intent of what he was saying, not what I thought he was saying. I honor that because I wouldn't want anybody to give a new interpretation of my poem while they're translating it.

They might be doing that anyway. There are very strong cultural limitations on translation, aside from the well-known linguistic ones, for you and I see things through our respective generations' North American eyes. How can we possibly convey Israeli reality with our American tools? And yet we're not the same Americans we once were, because we live here.

I think that if you can't convey Israeli reality in a translation from Hebrew then you'd better work a lot harder. When you've lived here a while you have to begin to understand. I often feel when I'm with people who have lived here since before 1948, through all the wars, that I'm really not part of this place, and that I'll never feel what they're feeling. Or people who are survivors of the Shoah. I only know it second hand from what they say or what they write, but then how many experiences can anyone have in a single life? And yet, we don't just write about ourselves...It takes a long time to be able to feel rapport with an Israeli poet.

Wardi: Wouldn't you say that you derive some strength, as a poet, from the distance you have?

You find that positive and I'm glad you do but there are Israelis who say, how can she write about this, or about women in the Bible, for instance? Whatever she writes is superficial because she brings her American background to it, not a deeply involved Israeli life.

Wardi: That's the strength of a hyphenated poet.

When I began to acknowledge that I did live on this hyphen as a bridge, I wanted to think it was a strength. If an Israeli like you tells me that, I feel very good.

Wardi: You seem to be able to capture some things here precisely because you come from somewhere else. I find this reinforced by the dominant visual aspect of your poetry. For example, the way you depict the light in "Sanctum," which really strikes me, a born Jerusalemite. And the way you recreate the landscape of and around the "stone sanctum" where you find your island of "nowhere."

That's interesting because I thought of "nowhere" as an escape from history and not just landscape. And from events, and a sense of the pressure of events that I need to break out of. The landscape here has had a tremendous influence on me, because it is different from where I grew up and where I used to live. I grew up in greenery, woods and trees and forest, green lawns, everything very lush because it rains so much in Seattle and the whole Pacific Northwest. In San Francisco I lived with water, the bay, the bridges, and the Pacific Ocean, the sense of always being able to go to water, which I can't find here in Jerusalem. The thing that was so striking to me about Greek poets when I read them first was light—light is the essence of Greek poetry. Light is very different in the Mediterranean area.

The poems in Threshold *are like snapshots of your life here in the millennium year.*

Almost all my poetry begins with what I see. I know that I'm a much more visual than aural person and that's why it's been difficult for me to learn Hebrew. I can't get it by ear, I have to see it written.

Many Israeli poets have been writing poems that relate in some way to the current, dire political situation. We hear the helicopters overhead right now as we speak, and we heard the shelling of Beit Sahur and Bethlehem last night. Do you think there is more public poetry in Israel than in America?

No, I don't think there's that much more. This is a very concentrated place. There's been a dialogue going on in America among poets and readers about political poetry for as long as I can remember, when I started writing in the fifties and the sixties. The Vietnam War especially drove everybody into writing political poetry.

Robert Bly wrote some pretty powerful poems, Denise Levertov wrote a lot [but] it was not so impressive as the rest of her work. Now we have many poets who write very strongly about social and political concerns, Adrienne Rich of course. But she's concerned about much more than most poets anywhere—social injustice, dehumanization.

Israeli poets, if they use political issues, don't write about social injustice as much as about how we conduct ourselves in relationship to each other in wartime and vis-a-vis the Palestinians. But I can't generalize about Israeli poetry because I mostly see it after it's translated or when I'm working on translations. Many of the Israeli poems that I see are bitter against the government—anti-establishment poems. Like the outpouring of poems in America during the Vietnam War—against President Johnson and the way the war was being conducted. Or the poems of Blacks and Latinos and Asians in the USA now, against social injustice and discrimination.

What do you think about the state of American poetry today? It seems to me that there are thousands of poets and thousands of writing programs. And a lot of magazines.

I think it's wonderful. I wish that were happening in Israel, although there must be more going on than I know about. I think that writing programs tend to turn out too many poets who are inexperienced in life but very crafty. They learn all the fundamentals of craft and they can write beautiful lines, but they don't have very much to tell us. But who knows, they'll deepen eventually, and there are some extraordinary first books, like ones I've recently discovered by Joshua Glover and Natasha Saje. I have been admiring experimentation also, by some younger women. Brenda Hillman comes to mind first, and Carol Snow.

What's wonderful about America is that there's been more encouragement and funding for bigger audiences for poetry in the last three decades than ever existed. It was just beginning when I lived in San Francisco, with the program for Poetry-in-the-Schools, where they brought poets into the high schools to meet teachers who had never learned how to teach poetry and kids who were totally turned off. We began by reading contemporary poetry instead of starting them off with the important classics they couldn't relate to at that age, so that by the time they began to think they liked poetry they would be ready for Shakespeare and Wordsworth, etc. Now there's an exciting project, started by [former US Poet Laureate] Robert Pinsky traveling all over America getting a great mix of people, through television and town meetings, from farmers to veterinarians to dentists to pick their favorite poem and read it aloud. I would love to see such a thing in Israel. When I first came I was told: Poetry is important in Israel, it's read on all public occasions—but I haven't found in the time I've lived here that it's important at all. It was nice that [former Prime Minister] Rabin took [Israeli poet Yehuda] Amichai with him to Sweden when he received the Nobel Prize. Amichai is certainly acknowledged as Israel's most distinguished poet. In a sense he represented the Israeli family; he was deeply involved with his. He had a

profound sense of history, Israel's struggles, and the suffering caused by continuous wars. And he was a great love poet. His death last year is a great loss.

Many people might have the idea that poets only work by themselves, sitting at their desks. Yet you sometimes participate in writing groups, in Jerusalem and Berkeley, you are willing to read and comment on other poets' work in progress, you read published poetry with friends, and translate in a process that might involve not only the poet being translated but also other readers. How important is this involvement with other readers and writers?

I don't know how important it is but it's very satisfying. I think writers in general and certainly poets tend to be very isolated people. We sit alone at our desks as you say. I can't even play music when I write, I have to hear the sound of my own voice, and when you hear the sound of your own voice all the time, it's good to have feedback from poets you respect and whose company you enjoy. On the other hand, it can be very confusing when you're sitting in a group with six poets who have six different reactions and somebody says "Take this out" and somebody else says "Leave that in." You end up finally doing what the one person in the group says that's closest to how you've been feeling all along. It is also helpful to hear what other people are writing. I don't have time to read through all the journals I get and all the new books and reviews, so just to share poems with other writers, meeting together at regular intervals, is very stimulating. I've always needed and wanted the association of other poets from time to time, looking at each other's work and talking about poetry together.

You're the mother of daughters. How does this rich and sometimes troubling experience influence your poetry? Have you written much to a "you" who is (also) a daughter?

From the beginning I've written poems for and about my three daughters, one especially. It started as a way to understand our troubled relationship, and to accept her need for independence and self-definition (before I thought she was ready!), to work it through in the words of a poem. Soon I realized that the mother-adolescent daughter struggle was hardly unique to us. It was something I shared with my readers, women from both generations who spoke to me after my public readings. I'm still exploring this mother-daughter theme, though my daughter has been a mother herself for more than twenty years. There are two poems in my newest book.

SHELL-FLOWERS

Like the turkeys you raise each year
I visit you fattened and older, fighting
to save my neck. I can't speak
your ineffable language. As if your soul
in its radiance has nothing to prove.
Like God. Though you have renamed him.
Was he in you already and only to be found?
Or did he come last year and take you
when you circled the Ka'ba seven times?

We manage somehow. Black scarf
fastened under your chin to hide
your hair. My grandmother in her wig.
Because only women can be shamed.
Musty petals as they brushed my cheek,
her lips trembled with psalms. She stirred
the soup with her daughters during the Seder
while the men shook the plagues from their fingers
and drank the wine.

When you were small
I sat on your bed and read to you
about the exquisite web a pig watched over.
The glow of the lamp on your rapt face.
I gave you shell-flowers, snug little magic
pockets that sank to the bottom of the glass.
A burst of crimson up through the water
on a green thread wagging its tissue paper leaves.
A leap of faith. I didn't know
how far it would carry you.

I have a kind of whimsical question. What do you think happened to all the poems you didn't write when you were raising those children? Did you write on the side, and put the poems in the drawer, as they say.

I wrote a lot of trendy poems when I was raising them, and studying for my MA degree at San Francisco State. And they were published in some of the far-out magazines in SF during the beat period. I actually started writing when I was seven years old. I was walking around the house reciting rhymes and my mother got me a leather bound book with empty pages. I have this book with poems in my handwriting from the age of seven, each one dated. They're not impressive. I didn't have good instruction or inspiration in grade school or even in high school, not at the level at which kids are writing today, though I discovered Carl Sandburg and Whitman and Edna St. Vincent Millay on my own. I had no creative

writing classes at UCLA—it was during World War II. I had one poetry class with a horrible professor—reading modern poetry that ended with Robert Browning!! I never even read Hopkins or Eliot for my BA in English. We had a final exam in which we were told we must write about our favorite poet and why, and I chose Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which I had loved since high school. I got a D, an almost failing mark, in the course. I went to see the teacher and asked, why did you give me a D for this, and she said: Look who you picked to write on, you don't have any taste…

You've never wanted to become an academic. Did you ever think of having a career other than writing poetry?

I wanted to get married after my BA because that's what all of my friends did during the war. But I had secret ambitions for a career in theater, and I had studied acting and performed in theater groups in Seattle.

But when you went back to graduate school you did teach.

Yes, I went on writing and finally went to evening classes at UC and found out that I didn't know anything about poetry. For the first time I learned to write associative, connotative poetry. I was introduced to the Spanish-language surrealists, Lorca, Neruda. My whole life changed when I went to San Francisco State to get an MA in writing. My thesis turned into my first book, which won a national prize. Everything changed then.