

To Mary for Her Servants of Catonsville

Everything has its vermin except that one,
Wife of a man without extraordinary wounds,
Mary who did the hard thing and in gentleness
Became mother of these the fire will not burn

Nor years, each sunrise perilous with love,
Deprive whatever dungeon be their bower
The impossible greeting for which the light
Is road and river:

“You are my children
In whom I have, as in a field, laid down
Not in contempt of darkness, but in the darkness
Uttered like the corn that gilds the grave
A language everybody understands.”

O angel of severe advising, let them
Not hate their cold bride and blazing Jerusalem.

For a Suicide

My serious distress exhausts the mean device
By which I have survived you and betrays
Your elegist, born with you in a bad year,
But with his death still in his hand.

Going the obscure way by the light
Of a rich branch, under the Elm
Fruitful of treasons, I draw my sword
Against the air. Easy the descent.

Great souls admire your careful wounds,
Clamorous, imperial, extinct in multitudes;
Before and after, up stream and down,
Tu Marcellus eris, numberless.

And see the gardens that they here devise
Who have no occupation now but love,
Gardens of great grieving, gardens of night,
The young forever moving their fair hands.

Hail! You who have picked the dexter way,
The Sacred Grove, inheritors of Persephone:
Jephthah's daughter, flowers in her hair,
Pallas, himself a flower, Galahad

And Isaac the gigantic questioners,
Greet now another by the right of wounds
Come down among you. Let this fame too
Be writ in an iron book and locked.

Madness is easy. But the reascent,
The closing of the wound, the wrestling match,
Heaven and Hell, honor and names, tears
And unoffending sleep, this is the labor

The matter of rising from this clear air
 To that mysterious sun. The gates stand open.
 Before me the white Elm and the dread fountain.
 Who would drink? Who would revisit?

For what was given has been taken back
 As in the aberration of starlight
 And we hear it depart, like a wind rising,
 Or a thunderous closing of doors.

In this time of mighty funerals a vision:
 Four children in four corners of the field
 Weeping white tears on the green grass
 Quite without sorrow and sleeping the starry night.

Flax

I walked into the fields of flax
 The winding sheet was blue as air
 My tongue was bitten like an ax
 My body dreamed in autumn's chair

And like a harvester I laid
 The tough stalks like a gust of hail
 The schoolyard on the hill betrayed
 The field to my sadistic flail.

How passive; how without defense
 Remembered harvests fall beneath
 The mowers now beyond pretense
 That harvest with remorse's teeth

Having and eating the unsown stands
 I never entered when they were
 A schoolyard in a farmer's hands
 And not the fief of autumn's chair.

Barry Holtz

The Words

Sinking, I am a drowning man. My voice
 Has failed me now, it cannot hold my body
 Above this sea of words, this hopeless misery
 Of toneless syllables and chilling, strident noise.
 My arms and legs surrounded by salt that cloy
 My palate, that chokes the harmony I see
 Before my eyes, but cannot grasp or free
 From dissonance, I feel myself destroyed.

The teachings of the Baal Shem say:
 Do not laugh at those whose shaking bodies move
 In prayer, for like a drowning man they
 Grasp at life and thrust themselves above
 The waters' deadly blows, but as I pray,
 My words sink down, beyond my reach, they pass away.

On Campus

In the bookstore I overhear the young poet
 Reciting verses to his lady. She,
 Unqueenlike, giggles delightedly; he
 Sir Walter, booms excitedly. I let
 Myself listen, embarrassed by his wet,
 Limpid words, her adolescent glee,
 The utter hopelessness of their sincerity:
 The eternal dance of innocents with nothing to regret.

I sadly see his vegetable book grown
 Ripe, like Marvell's love, fattened each day
 On the promise of girlish adulation thrown
 Before his feet, on a young belief in poetry.
 I mumble my way home and curse—
 Already I have turned him into verse.