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**"Dressing of the Dead Girl (aka Bride)"**

Too realistic, it didn't sell,  
Courbet's large canvas  
of a nude blond corpse  
having her feet washed.

The body was painted over  
with a dress, the pose  
revised. X-rays confirm  
the sound left arm

that hugs a mirror  
once dangled to the floor.  
Voila the bride  
brushed back to life

from a mortal slump,  
but still so limp  
and languorous it's as if  
she couldn't care less

what day it is. Thirteen  
women in white complete  
the tableau. They've not  
been retouched, their roles

in either wedding or wake  
interchangeable: someone  
to lift the sheets, set  
the table for a feast, reach

for heaven in a book. The view  
through the window  
where two lean and chat  
was left a blur, unfinished

as the picture itself,  
breathing out a sadness  
for everything latent, unborn,  
what lies beneath.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Effects

She reads the one letter  
that wasn't lost,  
the paper brown, each line  
a paper-cut

fine as the blade  
of grass between his teeth

when he posed  
in uniform, stretched

out on the lawn like a god  
on a sarcophagus.

How many candles has she lit,  
how many wreaths

laid at his feet?  
All along he was thinking

*what a weight  
around my neck. Dead bird.*

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## Cradle Song

The happy babies smile,  
invite me to  
reciprocate, accept

our common lot.  
I like their pink  
toothless gums,

their sleepy eyes  
so recently  
delivered. As yet

they have no problem  
with the Matthew quote  
"Thou sayest it."

Heaven's in the nipple,  
arms in a circle,  
a warm dry bed.

The restless infant  
in the pew ahead  
fiddles with a lock

of mother's hair.  
The priest leads his flock  
in the creed of Nicea.

I pray blind,  
unshriven,  
for all those breathing

on this muddy dot  
orbiting in space,  
and suffer the little children.

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### **Cage**

What I said  
was less an admission  
of affection

than a plea  
to keep silent.  
She folds her arms,

feigns cold.  
It should be snowing,  
but it's not.

I pull away  
from her desire  
to help me with a lie.

I hold out,  
keep to myself  
the real beginning

of my fear.  
In the gray sheen

of days to come

she'll continue  
to plant bulbs  
in her garden.

The abused dog,  
impertinent,  
will dig them up.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **To a Poet Born in 1947**

I drew maps for Mrs. Kelly  
with the purple birthmark  
on her cheek, copied from a book

snakes of rivers and borders,  
the reliefs of mountain chains.  
Nights were safe, lit by wicks

floating in kerosene. No cigarette  
chalked a warning in the air.  
Your poems take me back

to that year. I walk again  
among the vines heavy with Concords,  
wade through snow thigh-high.

I smell wet mittens and scarves,  
the cat we never named, see  
the blue cotton sunbonnet

patient on its nail. I was eleven  
when you were born, old enough  
to hold and bathe you, tilt

the bottle so you wouldn't swallow  
air. You would grow up  
as I did, drawn to the playful

tyranny of words. Ordered  
to tend the same vineyard  
where bonnets and cats

come to life, obliged to tame  
the inexpressible degrees  
of light and dark,

let us bless our work  
with water flung from a branch,  
honor it like chips of a saint's bone.

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