

## Toni Sammons / SEVEN POEMS

### NAGAME

Gravel puddles  
on the way to kindergarten —  
water and early consciousness

Yellow leaves under cold water  
more beautiful than on the sidewalk  
than even in the trees

to contemplate means  
*long rain*  
this you always knew  
but not  
that it won't always be this way:

the smell of gravel  
rainwater running through the leaves  
the piercing yellow, clear water

— the moment already gliding from you  
like a sketch  
on ice or twilight

## CAKILE

So much seems reasonable:  
those things connected  
by consequence or choice

a pink star moth  
alight on a pink flower  
an echo blue  
on powdery ceanothus

when chickens make meals  
out of cheeseweed  
you can whip their eggs  
into a pink meringue

the stamen hairs of spiderwort  
exposed to radiation change  
from blue to pink

and the refined face of a falcon  
in pink granite  
and handmade jars  
from the blue clay of Nara  
left for ceremony on the mountain  
rescue us from trivia  
if not disaster

But love isn't intention, no matter what you thought

the only thing you might choose  
is a bird, a name, a gesture

or a flower: hardy sea-rocket,  
sand abrading all its roots  
and fleeing lavender fingers  
crossed against the wind  
a flower spitting back  
at the wild salt,  
the spinning waves

## ALMOST HOME

unidentified birds on Bolinas ridge  
hidden in the wild arms of the oaks  
the oak wood wrestling with the light  
turning bronze, turning green again

drinking a Tsing-tao beer, emerald neck  
sharpened by light already sunk  
the sky a pale melon suffused  
with lilac, with luminous smoke

your child and loss an ache  
to the point of insanity  
unlocatable crickets skipping notes  
penny-colored leaves twisting  
from the ancient trees  
light gone, thinking  
of whom to kill

months later you smell the sea  
before you see it, and feel it  
before you smell it  
as though the door of the world  
had opened right next to you again  
snapping heartstrings  
in the old way

and although every empty trail  
is stepping off possibly toward nothing  
toward no place      toward strangers

you can't sustain unhappiness — it's lighter  
than the wind that blows  
the violet lupine into shakey fits  
against chalk-green serpentine

paths break on the smooth, dangerous beach  
the prussian of open sea, cerulean close-in  
and startling, like glass breaking  
long line of turquoise where the waves are bending

the shock of memory  
intensifies love, though memories  
by their nature frame a loss: bright flowers  
stumbling down yellow cliffs, the scent  
of iceplant warming in the sun  
the other-world colors of the water —  
you can't be unhappy,  
or content

## SCARCE VAPOURER

*Although Schroedinger was sure that electrons were  
standing waves, he was not sure what was waving.*  
Zukav

*We are a dispersed people whose history  
is a sensation of opaque fidelity.*  
Seamus Heaney  
"The Land of the Unspoken"

Within this twisting time earth still contains  
a language of mimics and metalmarks  
white turtleheads tapping at the gate, and flowers  
with red dragon-faces signaling the birds

glass-wings in the cloud forest, and glass frogs  
in the threading, tinted rain  
leaping through complex transparencies

and ghost rains in the desert, live nets beneath  
this trained to grasp  
existence from a shimmer

and our ghost voices hitting  
the luminary limit, slow echoes silenced  
just before collision

though possibly this is not final

perhaps some Celts sense being, loosely speaking,  
reassembled stars, and reach  
across a teapot toward the universe  
of right and left-handed molecules  
trying to be part  
of an infinite handshake

movement is what matters  
without impulse, nothing

and language why  
should it not be  
also inherently  
uncertain

even on our burdened paths  
we may be able to exhale  
a short-lived  
radiance

## LAUREL

*Neither witch nor devil, thunder nor lightning,  
will hurt a man in the place where a Bay tree is.*

A dark amber honey for the brood

No more.     *if only this*

Surfeits are from something else,  
another time

I wouldn't be strong  
or good: I'd wear bereavement  
like a caul

cursing the sanctimonious  
and acquisitive

but the land has patience  
and if you can find a house  
will give some to you, too

There is a lightness  
and heaviness waiting in each thing

you could bring into your kitchen  
branches of sassafras to dry,  
sweet strength of sassafras:  
like orange blossoms,  
and vanilla orchid



or roast peppernuts in ashes  
and learn that  
or rinse your hair with bruised  
cinnamon leaves, and find clarity  
in the hour

or steep yourself in hot water  
and narrow bay leaves, to cure  
an ailment of the heart

all the sounds of the tree  
rise up in you  
the strong scents of the  
dark earth may save you  
may do something

for you, green heart,  
greenheart

## THURSDAY WAS A DAY OF WOOD

Thursday was a day of wood  
manzanita in sealed bloom  
douglas-fir branches lying about  
needles going every which way

pushing aside wet leaf litter  
in the trunk of an old bay  
I disturb a little spider  
nearly invisible  
but dry like velvet

a glaucous glaze  
stiffens down the side  
on an injured pine

and at home my hand  
raises a scent  
of broken bay leaves  
leaky resin, earth-colored spider

Friday metallic light  
separates the clouds  
strikes the city like a bell  
makes narrow side streets glint  
like ice wedges in the tundra

we hum through the nectaries  
of Chinatown and bookstores  
like bees looking for the other side of blue

and at night silver and gold fly everywhere  
flatten against windows, dive ten stories  
the city is a collapsing kaleidoscope  
in conversation I am like someone  
waiting for sleep, only watching  
you and thinking: *this is like*  
*reading hieroglyphics:*  
*you have to remember*  
*to read into*  
*the faces of the animals*

because  
Saturday there's time enough for waking  
into the old rumpled feeling  
that will turn things up for  
twenty days or so  
like a flush of chanterelles  
smelling like apricots  
breaking through leaf mould  
and the sweet, black earth

## MIRROR FOR TIME

*many of the things the words were about  
no longer exist*

W.S. Merwin

"Losing a Language"

Now that we no longer have the river  
or the security of the simultaneous

only the slender strands of sequence  
and our ambiguous experience

in a conditional existence  
we choose our way with time  
and our ceremonies

a salted salmon for the new year  
guests and silver rice

taking a measure  
from the beginnings of intent  
the rich ochre  
and manganese on clay  
or the first cared-for oil plant  
four thousand years ago  
blooming in the Kurdish mountains  
fields of blue flowers  
bright as dragonflies

and prehistoric Anatolians  
scribbling in the highlands  
perhaps not images  
but sounds, *first*

touchstones rise like ash or pigeons  
toward the grey ceiling of the city  
carts sink against curbs, weighed down  
with branches of budding quince  
flowering on cold Northern time  
and yellow pumelos stacked up  
like leftover suns from the time of Yi  
and dense layers of mandarins  
burn toward you  
through the rainy air

Marvin asks, *Did you ever feel*  
*you were from another planet*  
*— I mean literally*  
*and you look around you, thinking*  
*this is really a nice planet*  
*but you're not from it*

where you really are is walking  
down a San Francisco street  
on a Sumerian seventh day of rest  
making a seam in space, disturbing time

breathing an openwork of fog  
the only vaporous drifts that you can stand  
smelling like lichen though no lichen can survive  
your skin remembering unremembered rivers

when you follow the lines in your palms  
all you can see are the disappearances:  
birch, salmon, bees

