

Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry.
— Mr. Bones: there is.

Dream Song 45

He stared at ruin. Ruin stared straight back.
He thought they was old friends. He felt on the stair
where her papa found them bare
they became familiar. When the papers were lost
rich with pals' secrets, he thought he had the knack
of ruin. Their paths crossed

and once they crossed in jail; they crossed in bed;
and over an unsigned letter their eyes met,
and in an Asian city
directionless & lurchy at two & three,
or trembling to a telephone's fresh threat,
and when some wired his head

to reach a wrong opinion, 'Epileptic'.
But he noted now that: they were not old friends.
He did not know this one.

This one was a stranger, come to make amends
for all the imposters, and to make it stick.
Henry nodded, un--

Dream Song 384

The marker slants, flowerless, day's almost done,
I stand above my father's grave with rage.
often, often before
I've made this awful pilgrimage to one
who cannot visit me, who tore his page
out: I come back for more,

I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave
who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn
O ho alas alas

When will indifference come, I moan & rave
I'd like to scrabble till I got right down
away down under the grass

and ax the casket open ha to see
just how he's taking it, which he sought so hard
we'll tear apart

the mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry
will heft the ax once more, his final card,
and fell it on the start.

FRANK BIDART

Ellen West

I love sweets, —
 heaven
would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream . . .

But my true self
is thin, all profile

and effortless gestures, the sort of blond
elegant girl whose
 body is the image of her soul.

— My doctors tell me I must give up
this ideal;

 but I
WILL NOT . . . cannot.

Only to my husband I'm not simply a "case."

But he is a fool. He married
meat, and thought it was a wife.

. . .

Why am I a girl?

I ask my doctors, and they tell me they
don't know, that it is just "given."

But it has such
implications — ;
 and sometimes,

I even feel like a girl.

. . .

Now, at the beginning of Ellen's thirty-second year, her physical condition has deteriorated still further. Her use of laxatives increases beyond measure. Every evening she takes sixty to seventy tablets of a laxative, with the result that she suffers tortured vomiting at night and violent diarrhea by day, often accompanied by a

weakness of the heart. She has thinned down to a skeleton, and weighs only 92 pounds.

• • •
About five years ago, I was in a restaurant,
eating alone

with a book. I was
not married, and often did that . . .

— I'd turn down
dinner invitations, so I could eat alone;

I'd allow myself two pieces of bread, with
butter, at the beginning, and three scoops of
vanilla ice cream, at the end, —

with a book, both in the book ^{sitting there alone}
and out of it, waited on, idly
watching people, —

when an attractive young man
and woman, both elegantly dressed,
sat next to me.

She was beautiful — ;
with sharp, clear features, a good
bone structure — ;

if she took her make-up off
in front of you, rubbing cold cream
again and again across her skin, she still would be
beautiful —

more beautiful.

And he, —

I couldn't remember when I had seen a man
so attractive. I didn't know why. He was almost
a male version
of her, —

I had the sudden, mad notion that I
wanted to be his lover . . .

— Were they married?

were *they* lovers?

They didn't wear wedding rings.

Their behavior was circumspect. They discussed
politics. They didn't touch . . .

— How could I discover?

Then, when the first course
arrived, I noticed the way
each held his fork out for the other
to taste what he had ordered . . .

They did this
again and again, with pleased looks, indulgent
smiles, for each course,

more than once for *each* dish — ;
much too much for just friends . . .

— Their behavior somehow sickened me;

the way each *gladly*
put the *food* the other had offered *into his mouth* — ;
I knew what they were. I knew they slept together.

An immense depression came over me . . .

— I knew I could never
with such ease allow another to put food into my mouth:
happily *myself* put food into another's mouth — ;

I knew that to become a wife I would have to give up my ideal.

• • •

Even as a child,
I saw that the "natural" process of aging
is for one's middle to thicken —
one's skin to blotch;

as happened to my mother.
And her mother.

I loathed "Nature."

At twelve, pancakes
became the most terrible thought there is . . .

I shall *defeat* "Nature."

In the hospital, when they
weigh me, I wear weights secretly sewn into my belt.

January 16. The patient is allowed to eat in her room, but comes readily with her husband to afternoon coffee. Previously she had stoutly resisted this on the ground that she did not really eat but devoured like a wild animal. This she demonstrated with utmost realism. . . . Her physical examination showed nothing striking. Salivary glands are markedly enlarged on both sides.

January 21. Has been reading *Faust*¹ again. In her diary, writes that art is the "mutual permeation" of the "world of the body" and the "world of the spirit." Says that her own poems are "hospital poems . . . weak — without skill or perseverance; only managing to beat their wings softly."

February 8. Agitation, quickly subsided again. Has attached herself to an elegant, very thin female patient. Homo-erotic component strikingly evident.

February 15. Vexation, and torment. Says that her mind forces her always to think of eating. Feels herself degraded by this. Has entirely, for the first time in years, stopped writing poetry.

Callas² is my favorite singer, but I've only seen her once — ;

I've never forgotten that night . . .

— It was in *Tosca*,³ she had long before lost weight, her voice had been, for years,

deteriorating, half itself . . .

When her career began, of course, she was fat, enormous — ; in the early photographs, sometimes I almost don't recognize her . . .

The voice too then was enormous — healthy; robust; subtle; but capable of crude effects, even vulgar,

almost out of

high spirits, too much health . . .

¹ Work by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1842) about the magician of German legend who enters into a compact with the devil.

² Maria Callas (1923–1977), Greek-American soprano.

³ An opera by Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924).

But soon she felt that she must lose weight, — that all she was trying to express

was obliterated by her body,
buried in flesh — ;

abruptly, within

four months, she lost at least sixty pounds . . .

— The gossip in Milan was that Callas had swallowed a tapeworm.

But of course she hadn't.

The *tapeworm*

was her *soul* . . .

— How her soul, uncompromising,
insatiable,

must have loved eating the flesh from her bones,

revealing this extraordinarily
mercurial; fragile; masterly creature . . .

— But irresistibly, nothing
stopped there; the huge voice

also began to change: at first, it simply diminished
in volume, in size,

then the top notes became

shrill, unreliable — at last,
usually not there at all . . .

— No one knows *why*. Perhaps her mind,
ravenous, still insatiable, sensed

that to struggle with the *shreds* of a voice

must make her artistry subtler, more refined,
more capable of expressing humiliation,
rage, betrayal . . .

— Perhaps the opposite. Perhaps her spirit
loathed the unending struggle

to *embody* itself, to *manifest* itself, on a stage whose
mechanics, and suffocating customs,
seemed expressly designed to annihilate spirit . . .

— I know that in *Tosca*, in the second act,
when, humiliated, hounded by Scarpia,

she sang *Vissi d'arte*

— "I lived for art" —

and in torment, bewilderment, at the end she asks,
with a voice reaching

harrowingly for the notes,

"Art has repaid me LIKE THIS?"

I felt I was watching

autobiography —

an art; skill;

virtuosity

miles distant from the usual soprano's
athleticism, —

the usual musician's dream

of virtuosity *without* content . . .

— I wonder what she feels, now,
listening to her recordings.

For they have already, within a few years,
begun to date . . .

Whatever they express
they express through the style of a decade
and a half — ;

a style *she* helped create . . .

— She must know that now
she probably would *not* do a trill in
exactly that way, —

that the whole sound, atmosphere,
dramaturgy of her recordings

have just slightly become those of the past . . .

— Is it bitter? Does her soul
tell her

that she was an *idiot* ever to think
anything

material wholly could satisfy? . . .

— Perhaps it says: *The only way*
to escape

the History of Styles

is not to have a body.

When I open my eyes in the morning, my great
mystery

stands before me . . .

— I *know* that I am intelligent; therefore

the inability not to fear food
day-and-night; this unending hunger
ten minutes after I have eaten . . .

a childish

dread of eating; hunger which can have no cause, —

half my mind says that all this
is *demeaning* . . .

Bread

for days on end

drives all real thought from my brain . . .

— Then I think, No. The ideal of being thin

conceals the ideal

not to have a body — ;

which is NOT trivial . . .

This wish seems now as much a "given" of my existence

as the intolerable

fact that I am dark-complexioned; big-boned;

and once weighed

one hundred and sixty-five pounds . . .

— But then I think, No. That's too simple, —

without a body, who can

know himself at all?

Only by

acting; choosing; rejecting; have I

made myself —

discovered who and what *Ellen* can be . . .

— But then again I think, NO. This *I* is anterior

to name; gender; action;

fashion;

MATTER ITSELF, —

. . . trying to stop my hunger with FOOD

is like trying to appease thirst
with ink.

. . .

March 30. Result of the consultation: Both gentlemen agree completely with my prognosis and doubt any therapeutic usefulness of commitment even more emphatically than I. All three of us are agreed that it is not a case of obsessional neurosis and not one of manic-depressive psychosis, and that no definitely reliable therapy is possible. We therefore resolved to give in to the patient's demand for discharge.

. . .

The train-ride yesterday
was far *worse* than I expected . . .

In our compartment
were ordinary people: a student;
a woman; her child; —
they had ordinary bodies, pleasant faces;
but I thought

I was surrounded by creatures
with the pathetic, desperate
desire to be *not* what they were: —

the student was short,
and carried his body as if forcing
it to be taller — ;

the woman showed her gums when she smiled,
and often held her
hand up to hide them — ;

the child
seemed to cry simply because it was
small; a dwarf, and helpless . . .

— I was hungry. I had insisted that my husband
not bring food . . .

After about thirty minutes, the woman
peeled an orange

to quiet the child. She put a section
into its mouth — ;

immediately it spit it out.

The piece fell to the floor.

— She pushed it with her foot through the dirt
toward me
several inches.

My husband saw me staring
down at the piece . . .

— I didn't move; how I wanted
to reach out,

and as if invisible

shove it in my mouth — ;

my body
became rigid. As I stared at him,
I could see him staring

at me, —

then he looked at the student — ; at the woman — ; then
back to me . . .

I didn't move.

— At last, he bent down, and
casually

threw it out the window.

He looked away.

— I got up to leave the compartment, then
saw his face, —

his eyes
were red;

and I saw

— *I'm sure I saw* —

disappointment.

. . .

On the third day of being home she is as if transformed. At breakfast she eats butter and sugar, at noon she eats so much that — for the first time in thirteen years! — she is satisfied by her food and gets really full. At afternoon coffee she eats chocolate creams and Easter eggs. She takes a walk with her husband, reads poems, listens to recordings, is in a positively festive mood, and all heaviness seems to have fallen away from her. She writes letters, the last one

a letter to the fellow patient here to whom she had become so attached. In the evening she takes a lethal dose of poison, and on the following morning she is dead. "She looked as she had never looked in life — calm and happy and peaceful."

Dearest. — I remember how
at eighteen,

on hikes with friends, when
they rested, sitting down to joke or talk,

I circled
around them, afraid to hike ahead alone,
yet afraid to rest
when I was not yet truly thin.

You and, yes, my husband, —
you and he

have by degrees drawn me within the circle;
forced me to sit down at last on the ground.

I am grateful.

But something in me *refuses* it.

— How eager I have been
to compromise, to kill this *refuser*, —

but each compromise, each attempt
to poison an ideal
which often seemed to *me* sterile and unreal,

heightens my hunger.

I am crippled. I disappoint you.

Will you greet with anger, or
happiness,

the news which might well reach you
before this letter?

Your *Ellen*.

To My Father

I walked into the room.

There were objects in the room. I thought I needed nothing

from them. They began to speak,
but the words were unintelligible, a painful cacophony . . .
Then I realized they were saying

the name
of the man who had chosen them, owned them,
ordered, arranged them, their deceased cause,
the secret pattern that made these things order.
I strained to hear: but
the sound remained unintelligible . . .
senselessly getting louder, urgent, deafening.

Hands over my ears, at last I knew
they would remain
inarticulate; your name was not in my language.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

At the Fishhouses

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.
The air smells so strong of codfish
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
among the wild jagged rocks,
is of an apparent translucence
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
growing on their shoreward walls.
The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,