



*Three Candles Featured Poet:*

# **Ruth Daigon**

**A Whiff of Chaos: *Selected Poems***

## **A Whiff of Chaos: Selected Poems**

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**Credits:**

"To Sing", "A Future That Resembles Now", "A Whiff of Chaos", "After the Failed Revolution, 1905", "Somewhere in Another Country", "Scents of Danger", "Mother of Alphabets" and "To Hell With the Revolution If I Can't Dance" are taken from the collection, *The Moon Inside* (Newton's Baby, 1999)

"The Cleansing", "Tenant", and "The Borders of Beyond" are taken from *Ruth Daigon's Greatest Hits, 1971-2000* (Pudding House Publications, 2001)

"Repositioning the Mattress", "Unlit Places", "Receding Avenues", "This Town", "Handfuls of Time", "Storied Lives", "Temporary Constellations", "One Becomes" and "Practicing the Seasons" are taken from *Handfuls of Time* (Cedar Hill Press, upcoming, 2002)

"Every Herring Hangs By Its Own Head" and "Night Songs" are taken from *A Portable Past* (San Jose Poets Press, 1986)

"Wet World", "The Moon Inside", "Carpenter", and "Night's Other Country" are taken from *Between One Future and the Next* ( Papier-Mache Press, 1995)

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?

## **To Sing**

to sing unencumbered by the dead,  
to find new ways among the living  
as night breaks its vow of silence  
letting darkness out

to sing like birds  
in passionate anonymity  
all swoop and soar  
in morning's stunned beginnings

to sing in the shell of time  
and wait for echoes from the deep  
the smell of salt and gulls calling  
the always mystery of fogs

to sing our numbered hours  
and spin the inner moons of earth  
with rarity of simple things like snow  
and windows frosted white

to sing an octave above the past  
against a loud silence, the extravagance of loss  
when all was garden, grace and eden  
where nothing when it happened was enough

to sing faithful to the flesh  
the heart's percussion  
the naked sprawl of days

and celebrate that we have come this far

## **A Future That Resembles Now**

In a continuum of clean sheets  
and white nights  
I sleep with my watch  
secure on my wrist  
and balance on  
the year's narrow edge.

I know some small things:  
the first frost sweetens,  
the second kills.

In my secret world, light  
shines like dandelions  
gone to seed in a moonscape  
and a single tree  
draws me to the ferny  
underbelly of woods.

As birds wing  
in old departures,  
I'm ambushed by petals,  
leaf mold, earth crust  
and a shock of sky.

In a future that resembles now  
I learn to pat death  
like a dog, it's growing  
so familiar. When I pick flowers,  
they root in my palm, tendrils  
lace through fingers.

Long after they fade  
I'm wrapped in their silk  
as I rest in the tall grass  
absolutely still  
like a stone warmed by the sun  
denting the earth.

## **A Whiff of Chaos**

in a caesura between now and then  
she clings to the time  
when looking back was sweet  
a dream of open space  
of nights fragrant with feathers  
and a carapace of stars  
instead  
there are snapshots soaked in vinegar and honey  
the failed revolution and days gone to scrub  
the car's lost in longterm parking  
her pockets flapping inside out  
there's dust to water down  
sheets to air  
and the mirror no longer casts its spell  
but  
so far the sky's still there  
sunlight climbs from the latest dark  
as the new day hovers like surprise  
and before she lies in the stone throat of sleep  
she breathes scent of buds nipping from branches  
of ripe mornings random as vines  
or listens to the terse comments of rain,  
the hovering business of hummingbirds  
and marvels at the luster of lightning bugs  
or a thread of spittle sparkling in a cat's yawn.

it's the best that she can do  
not much  
unless  
it's everything

## **After the Failed Revolution, 1905**

After the hunger march to the tsar's palace  
begging for bread,  
after the slaughter,

father sleeps in dialectical paradise and mother  
packs the samovar, the china, the ruby glass,  
the children.

Her face carries its tribe  
just below the skin and  
somewhere they are spinning the thread

measuring its length and breadth,  
poised  
with the terrible shears.

She restores the hair on her head,  
gold teeth in broad smiles  
and dreams of a land locked in amber.

Desire curled in her fist,  
she sails for America  
silent with all the others.

No wheel of miracles  
just the hand which is, the eye which is  
and the long nerve of history.

Breathless and sunblind, mother  
tunnels through bitter earth  
into salt of heaven.

She builds a fire to warm her children  
and the flame is bright,  
the shadows dim.

Learning English from the book  
of exiles, she mouths words,  
tonguing, polishing

until they grow liquid. Then  
she nibbles on chicken wings,  
gnawing bones clean.

Her thoughts tug at their moorings:

the half-light of childhood,  
daybreaks bursting like seeds,

a forest of old tongues telling stories,  
winds rattling obituaries,  
and the past spreading its stain.

She whispers names out of time  
until the new world arrives  
fresh with heat and light.

Flesh tones of memory fade  
as she stores the children  
under her heart. Alone and growing

wiser, mother undresses the dark  
and sleeps with moonlight  
resting in her palms.



## **The Cleansing**

*In Siberia, during the wedding, the bride was required to wash the feet of the groom and drink the water.  
Only then was she considered worthy to be taken as a wife.*

She lifts his right foot,  
then his left,  
soaping between the toes,  
scooping dirt from under nails,  
doing what must be done,  
scrubbing in unleavened silence.

Pale glue of tears clinging to lashes,  
she licks her lips tasting the instant  
when she was none other than herself  
sitting in the kitchen  
curtains drawn,  
floor swept,  
dipping into the curve and coil of wife,  
practicing  
until she got it right.

The night before, she dreamt of spring shoots  
pushing purple tongues through earth's skin,  
of babies swimming toward her  
slippery as tadpoles  
her unskilled hands can't capture.  
And in the morning, she awakes  
to pinpricks of sun, birds  
blading against the horizon.

This is her wedding day,  
air thick with accordian notes,  
swirling skirts, embroidered shirts,  
the smell of kumiss and vodka.

She takes one last look over her shoulder  
at childhood so remote,  
it belongs to someone else  
nothing's left  
not a ribbon  
not a thread.

He sits like a boulder in the sun.  
His voice makes him taller.  
When he bends a listening face toward her  
she unknots a smile  
and lifts the basin to her lips.

## **Repositioning the Mattress**

We pivot around each other  
not even our shadows collide.  
Dust lifts and settles like the first  
snow as we shift through  
margins of air and islands of time.

Flipping it over, each wrist  
with its bracelet of flesh,  
each finger shaped by its bone, we're  
upending the days,  
exploring the spaces between.

After the long night and porcelain dreams,  
after rivers of sleep, morning  
hangs by a thread.  
Face to face, we imagine our bodies  
stored in hollows,  
secret deposits deep in the foam.

The day has no beginnings-  
sky goes everywhere at once  
in turquoise innocence.  
Warmth rises. Sweat gleams  
and the echo of our interlocking rhythms  
pulse through vacant rooms.

This house is what it is,  
each wall stands alone  
each window with a sky of its own  
and we are reaching backwards, love,  
in a seethe of memories  
that ache like static from another world.

This old mattress grown heavy with meaning,  
lopsided with usage,  
slopes into a cave  
where we tumble like children  
in salt waters of the heart.

## **Somewhere in Another Country**

she spends half the night  
caught in sleep's undertow  
or on the surface  
staring through scars of light  
trapped in windows  
where sky is half the world and  
everything moves with care  
past guard dogs and dead bolts  
past triggers hidden in the hearts  
of strangers and Guernica  
just beyond the view  
nightprowl  
no safe houses  
and a handgun follows her  
up the stairs

~

somewhere  
in another country  
a trunkful of old love letters  
burns  
a singed hand rests among the ashes  
a woman  
sleepless among the sleeping  
moves from room to room

testing the weather of her breath  
she stands in the cold kitchen  
each pot in place  
and looks through the window

she has no other dress except  
the one mother made  
walks in serious shoes  
and when she's tired  
sips scalding tea

joining all those mute  
and smiling women  
she keeps her heart hidden  
in her fist

~  
she rummages through the alphabet  
for friends  
files away the past  
checks the stove  
turns off the lights  
and comes late to mother's funeral

talks to death  
like a next-door neighbor  
listens to the hours grinding their gears  
and counts days detaching themselves like loose buttons  
barricades the door  
against waters rising  
assassins cruising the streets and night  
hovering dangerous and close

~  
she dreams about the sadness  
of doors and windows  
limp curtains fading light

and in her dream it is  
the brown month of November  
the month of sand in streets  
cracks in pavements  
windblown trash

she dreams  
about cold mornings  
people rising early  
to tend the earth spread out  
holding up the sky

she dreams about summer  
in the country  
long-leaved and green  
before winter hurt the flowers  
and veined the earth with frost

water weaves its thin thread  
through all her dreams  
and under a spine of stars  
her dead are growing old

~

She imagines waking into another life:  
caviar for breakfast  
slick black  
coating the tongue.

She imagines a hope for the evening:  
crystal goblets wine  
immaculate table cloth  
a fever of flowers in every room.

Sultry scenes unfold like paper flowers  
in a water glass as she  
readies to go out,  
scarved and starry-eyed but

something's always left behind,  
her head forgotten in a shower cap  
hanging on a hook, her hands  
resting on the coffee table.

She finds a safe place  
on the slow lane, seat belt  
pulled tight, her mouth's  
the small shape of worry.

In the corner store,  
she catwalks down corridors,  
pushing her basket  
while hidden mirrors

swallow her image. Undecided  
on aisle seven, she stands  
on one foot while the other sleeps.  
The bag boy nods to her and

if she speaks at all, she speaks  
in whispers. On the sale counter  
she looks for day old bread, cracked eggs  
oranges spotted with decay. Sorting through

spoilage, she uncovers the world.  
Passersby warn her:  
*It's old, riddled with soft spots.*  
She buys it anyway.

**" Every Herring Hangs By Its Own Head "**

– *Thomas Carlyle*

After they string you up,  
you open your gills  
like a blessing,  
a gasp of unity  
with all the others  
trapped in the same net.

Wrapped in your sheen  
with your fishmouth  
and unshuttered eye,  
you splash in waves of wind  
to the rhythm of remembered water.

Parsing darkness with your finny smell,  
you learn the shape of dry space  
as the liquid life  
shimmers down below.

But everything that cannot swim  
begins to drown in sunlight.  
Your journey shrinks  
as you shrivel.

When evening nails down the day,  
you hang cluttering the cool night,  
splintering darkness and leaping  
at the moon's white thumbnail.

## **Unlit Places**

The dead complain we lack  
the skill to keep them buried.  
But that's the grave's job  
and there's no safe burial ground.  
They'll shine up through the earth  
spreading their affection.

They're offered refuge  
under markers and memorials  
but they refuse and wait  
for us in unlit places  
tapping their white canes  
with the terrible patience  
of those possessing time.

In the slow caress of years,  
our weight is doubled by  
the burden of others  
we cultivate and carry,  
and deep in the future  
our children keep us alive.

### 2

Since we have learned not to kill them  
things have been easier.

Though we prefers our ghosts  
to inhabit the dark

if they come by day  
we'll leave all the doors open.

We watch them mouthing secrets,  
smiling as if there were two heavens

and recall simple equations in the heart's circumference,  
each sum exquisitely fixed in our memory:

women in sweet and sudden rages  
for fear the future comes when they're not looking

children claustrophobic in their skins  
fanning out like fish bones



younglings piercing love's delicate membrane  
to taste the fleshy core

friends in the gray solfeggio of autumn  
and the ritual smile .

Together with them the seeded hours pass  
until a spill of sun, a sweep of shade

and under the ashen stars  
our dead grow invisible.

## Night Songs

After slashing through our jungle  
full of savage summer  
where animals lie sick  
with heat (even the hunters  
too overcome to drag  
trophies home) we'll dream  
through scorched nights  
of cool vegetable mornings,  
corn springing from  
the navel of Osiris,  
the Nile emptying drop by  
drop into a glass of milk

\*

The moon invents new metals,  
the house lifts off. Down below  
on the outspread map of night,  
rivers branch like blood vessels.  
New provinces emerge, borders  
blur until a sea of light  
washes over the landscape.  
Then, phosphorescent dials  
guide us back to the landing strip  
and all our windows crack open  
with the smell of lilacs.

\*

Catch me someone, I've just jumped  
from the fiftieth storey.  
Wrapped in air's loose skin,  
I take a deep breath,  
pat my secret pocket  
and feel my death as solid  
as my father's eighteen carat watch.  
Years rush up to meet me.  
Friends call from upper storeys.  
I plunge past men with eyes  
turned inward, women  
self-contained as cactus.  
There's just time enough to shout,  
*"This will be a hard act to follow."*

## **Scents of Danger**

1

Something lies half-buried, waiting.  
Silence has its holding place in cracks  
crevices, erosions. On overgrown corners  
thistles raise their spears, rocks their humps.  
Seeds tighten roots in a stranglehold  
of green. Vines twist through rotting lumber  
before the slow return, beyond the line of shatter,  
back to a dream of animals again.

2

They move in  
towards the house.  
Snakes slip through hedges.

A red fox  
squatting on its tail, devours  
apples from our tree.

The lawn's sieved by rodents.  
A shadow of a wing  
covers the wall.

With a terrible hunger  
they inhabit my green  
jungle of sleep.

Lewd, toothy, carnivorous  
they signal me with  
dream claws and fangs.

I signal back  
with ancient mouth  
and furred throat

until the bloodrush  
in a linkage of dreams.

3

Driven from the woods, the fox  
propelled by hunger,  
moves in solitary circles

around the house.

I separate sounds that enter  
from sounds that leave.  
As she devours apples,  
I wipe froth from my mouth

and feel the pulse of wild things  
in the green night of the forest.  
The smallest rasp of leaf on leaf  
is signal enough to sense a victim

to make the perfect strike  
and taste the blood's dark rush.  
When she trots off, brush extended,  
amber body parting the green

she turns for one last look at me.  
From the door, half-open,  
I return that look,  
staring the wilderness down.

4

Birds trill  
down a long September  
from bare tree to bald ground.  
Animals crazy with life  
race through undergrowth.

Suddenly  
woods are splattered with gunshots  
the high whine of blood  
and the hunters.

They know the secret of balance  
of focusing the bullet  
of aiming dead center at  
what I never understood  
but what I choose to love.

Along the path a spent  
cartridge lies half-buried  
a shred of sunlight  
in its plastic shell.

5

Hidden from the world in a couch of grass  
and leaves, secure from storms that pass, I  
depend on old migrations, a slow measuring  
of ends and where blindness leads, I follow.  
Aboveground scrub grass bristles and the scent  
of danger's everywhere but I know how safe  
a safe distance under earth is and how far.

## **Wet World**

1

I strip and give myself to the current  
in a secret baptism. Stroking  
along a beam of light, the sun

under my elbow, I feel the muscle  
inside the water, the surface skin.  
Through layers of drowned time,

my body moves like a sleek fish.  
No bait can tempt me.  
On the open eye of the pond, I swim

now into the willow's shadow,  
now into the underside of light  
exchanging shade for shade.

Whispers skim along the water,  
creak of tree, scrub of brush.  
Summer lasts forever.

I think of air and float,  
think of earth and still I  
float, the skin-warm liquid

washing me, and surrender  
to the current, knowing water  
just like love can take me  
anywhere I've never been before.

2

Expect a certain absence in me  
during winter. I still inhabit  
those bronze days down at the pond

with the sun grafted to my knees.  
It is everything  
that wet, green place.

Reaching into it, I feel  
the water inside the water  
and hold that liquid world

between my hands. Guided  
by invisible springs, the body  
dissolves like a wafer on the tongue.

The depth that drowns  
supports me. Water's my protection  
against water and one ripple

returns me to the shore  
to lie full length and mindless  
tasting of sun and sweat and me.

3

The pond's a fresher blue.  
Frogs leap along the edge  
with a hundred night songs.

The water's tempting with its  
shine, its pulse, its flow,  
its promise of abandon.

Waves arch their backs,  
fish dart silverquick in shadows,  
snakes spiral past unseen.

I dive and enter, swimming  
steadily away from myself,  
one stroke at a time

and long for things that do not  
surface. Mossy sounds slip  
arms around brown shoulders.

The quiet breathes in and out of focus.  
Echoes skim along the water, as I float  
on sea green surges under grass green sky.

And it is always morning  
and t is always evening  
and it is always now.

## **Tenant**

Like an ideal tenant  
the bullet fits precisely in the wound,  
closer than a friend,  
a relative, a lover.

Removing it, what can we  
give the body in exchange  
to accommodate it  
half so well?

Always the unexpected caller,  
it only sleeps with strangers,  
never fails to find the perfect host,  
and it in turn

becomes the perfect guest  
bringing no gift but itself,  
demanding nothing. Lying  
cradled in the flesh,

never struggling to emerge,  
cushioned in that hollow  
as if it knew each curve,  
it wraps itself in silence.



## **Receding Avenues**

1

Father balances on scaffolding  
high above our games.  
Each time he spits a nail  
and drives it in  
a wall goes up.  
Room dividers rise  
from hopscotch squares  
the whole house framed on stilts.

He climbs the ladder  
waves from every window  
until I catch his signal  
return it and find myself  
waving from our top floor  
at his bent frame growing smaller  
as he moves along receding avenues.

I look out  
signaling my son  
who for a moment  
recognizes me, signals back  
then shifts into a new position  
straining to see something  
not yet visible.

2

Out at 5  
he checks his shoelaces  
and jogs those uphill miles  
orbiting quiet lives.  
Sleep peels away

as he runs through  
broad-loomed silence  
mouth cupping air  
eyes slanted inward  
breath clamped between teeth.

In fresh-tarred mornings, he  
passes granite walls  
birds perched on rusting tractors  
yards full of scratching chickens  
and woods ripe with skunk cabbage.

Sometimes gravity is not enough  
to slow him down. Sometimes  
distance drags his heels  
but after the final stretch

he slams through the kitchen door  
leans against the jamb  
the smell of his breath  
like an animal just born.

3

His birthdays are stacked  
like old catalogs on back verandas  
filled with ads for telescopes  
guitars, skis, skates  
the full throttle of rock and roll.

He drifts from one  
mirror to the next  
growing taller, thinner  
his days all sky and air  
fresh as grass.

He makes his travel plans  
and all the leaves  
like green hands waving  
from the willow near the pond  
applaud him.

I've wrapped him like a gift  
in plain brown paper  
sealed, stamped, no return address  
marked for special delivery  
into his own two hands.

4

I mailed him an extra year  
from another country  
where wooden sidewalks  
end in cinder paths

where privies lean  
a little more each year  
and morning light falls  
weightless on rain barrels

Enclosed he'll find a Chevy  
with running boards  
a Burma Shave sign  
that points the way he'll

travel years from now.  
I've wrapped with care  
the smell of citronella  
camphor and cod liver oil

a woolen bathing suit that  
shrinks an inch each season  
It's just arrived and waiting  
at the back door of his life

## **This Town**

This town is small enough  
to fill a single snapshot  
only a post office,  
gas station, church  
and two liquor stores  
both held up last Thursday

by men with sawed-off, double-barrel  
shot-guns. In the first  
they scooped up the take,  
eighty dollars,  
in the next, the clerk  
fired his brand new gun.

People work in gardens  
lean on back fences  
talk a little  
then go back to digging  
and make a truce with earth

*In* the distance, a tractor driven  
by the brush-stroke of a man  
weaves across the fields  
until the sky prepares for evening.

He leans against the barn,  
smells the green,  
sees birds rising in the sky  
as if they had a reason

to feel at home there  
and watches the traffic of the stars  
over fields finally balanced  
on the sill of the world.

At dusk, fences grow invisible,  
crickets count the seconds,  
stone walls smell of earth breath  
and the world is twice as far away.

Wind chimes make small music  
in the cool night air.  
The farm steps into shadows.

Time's partitioned between markers  
and memorials. Familiar lives erased  
as easily as footsteps in snowmelt  
and everything yields to its soft spot.

Sudden rain ruins the hay crop.  
Light unravels.  
Time strips down to crisped grass,  
burned blades of old summers.

The season's buried under a debris  
of days and his dead shift into  
new positions underground.

## **Handfuls of Time**

*I gave my life to learning how to live  
Now that I have organized it all...  
It is just about over.*

Sandra Hochman

No space, no separation  
only barefoot days  
and the eye heavy with moments

as time nourished the moment's peak  
the rind of afternoon  
the evening husks of silence.

It grew a living body for each hour  
as seeds exploded, earth turned green  
and space was light and still.

Nothing was ordinary  
newness pierced the heart  
and all we understood was motion.

Dazzled by the wheel and its long journey,  
convinced we came from some time, somewhere  
and were real, we searched the alphabet

traced letters into copy books  
leafed through pages springing back  
to the beginning, to old ways

first ways, lost, unheard-of ways  
and studied all things visible  
revealed to us by light.

Now, it guides with Benedictine patience  
glossed footsteps of November  
in our transparent lives

as we gather handfuls of time  
to rub against our mouths  
and reassure each other

*We're here for a little while  
and forever is another possibility.*

## **Storied Lives**

Snow is a kindness to the old.  
It covers the bones of winter.  
Well-worn paths become sudden-new  
and strangers speak to one another  
convinced that somewhere they were friends.

Memory releases earlier worlds  
innocent of endings. Sound  
gathers on horizon's spine.  
Chords of sunlight sing the morning in  
and the skin of earth is beautiful.

As the traveler moon  
floats into view  
nights are long and longer  
than the long wind  
sweeping over prairies  
and wind has no history.

Moment by moment  
the old are moving out  
one leaves soon another sooner  
stepping lightly lightly  
to taste the dark particular.

Voices hum in the wind  
and the old do nothing.  
They lean upwards  
laying secrets bare to the moon  
to the snow falling in alphabets of silence  
and the small mercies of the stars.

## Temporary Constellations

While the dark grooms its fur,  
we, fixed in the present,  
dream meadowlands of the past  
where unknown faces rise up  
and sink back  
Nothing's ever remembered whole  
windy images swimming in darkness  
misplaced summers when the golden sun splashed our faces  
or a cold congress of leaves and a scruff of earth  
could mean any autumn  
No honey of comfort in old memories  
No clear and certain sounds  
of parents with life in their mouths telling stories  
they can never quite recall  
only the rustle of words just before words  
circling in upon themselves  
where we walk one step at a time  
our fists full of cold stones

ghost voices return  
speaking another language  
half heard half forgotten  
we work at remembering what to keep  
and what to throw away  
before the absent ones come back in dreams  
wearing our faces  
with terrible new smiles  
entering familiar rooms only to discover  
unfamiliar food served by unfamiliar mothers  
not in a known past but in stopped time  
until a resonance opens the dark world  
where only the moon is continuous

*Memory... a temporary constellation binding a set of sensory images into a momentary sensation of a remembered whole.* Daniel L. Schrager



## **The Borders of Beyond**

And the blind  
whisper to each other  
in thin voices.

They walk the borders of day  
every street a new language  
in a landscape already lost.

Hours slide by  
smooth as polished chrome  
and old habits are lovely

with memory coating fingertips  
feet tracing the pavement's  
rough surface, and gravity

always underfoot. Faces turned toward  
sun, they drink the rich, sweet  
light and dream raw dreams

inside their world of black dazzle.  
In survivors sad reckonings  
they conjure names with one hand

and release them with the other  
balancing on tightropes of sound.  
And always a honed silence

as they carry solitude up the stairs  
where time is a slow thought  
and forever just another possibility.

## **Mother of Alphabets**

You call me from the under skin of sleep  
beyond the dream of dust and drought  
of spring floods and rings of fire.

You store in the heart's hollow  
a perfect memory never-to-be-completed.  
Your soft-skinned inner arms  
begin the story of my life.

You teach me how to enter the day  
how to be quiet  
marooned in a tongue of shade  
where there's no sound as startling as silence.

Musing on the black keys  
I know what I know:  
how the seasons insist and encourage,  
how dark eyes of water glitter through grass in the spring  
how the heart tugs at the end of September  
how December's crust leads me back  
to frozen footsteps and idling light.

Snake dancing before the blaze  
I'm blanketed by winds  
protected by cave shadows  
but if I step out of the circle  
the earth worm will find me

Better a damaged day of almost spring  
expanding without limits than a safe haven  
austere and silent.  
Better the cactus and its thorny geometrics  
than the night-blooming orchid.

There is no such thing as no such thing  
and I am oracle and secret  
like a lone feather on the breath of a wind  
or the spider that spins a retreat but no web,  
or a moment of pure waiting.

## **One Becomes**

— *Simone de Beauvoir*

The compulsive universe hoards another day  
being-for-itself, being-in-itself  
the sweet swindle of spring  
summer's hazy veil  
autumn's vermilion and ash  
and the secret cave she hid in  
full of waiting  
lodged in the stillness of an earth  
lying stunned under some strange heaven.

She will ask her breath  
what it is to be human,  
how it feels to be.  
She will trace it to its roots,  
hers the choice, the act,  
irrational or wise.

Even in the universe of lost things  
or the midnight mind's wild schemes,  
she knows there is only now  
and the desert stillness  
is the silence of her heart.

Even if nothing is her only something  
she is and is  
not like a stone, a tree, a tiger  
with their fixed essence,  
what they do and who they are.  
But she, thrown into the vast,  
has the power of rejecting all the May-I's.

It's a day like any other day  
and in appearance the sky is blue.  
But she also knows how small the day is  
the rush of color  
the evaporating brightness.

She hears a hairline crack before the rubble,  
listens for thunder in the afternoon  
and as she walks the narrow paths of thoughts,  
hers the choice,  
the move that opens wide.

Standing close and unafraid of meanings,  
tart or honeyed,  
she takes them in  
or not.  
Between the known and the unknown,  
all names are but one name  
and the power to name is finally hers.

## **To Hell With the Revolution If I Can't Dance**

— *Emma Goldman*

In a place between places, she bathes  
in miles of wind with milk-  
white linen to wick her dry.

Out of wild pockets through spiraling  
light into ardent worlds  
she searches for him, humming

*I am your match,  
your mate, your other self,  
the dark inside where sight fails.*

When they meet, he invites  
her to the dance  
and their myth begins.

With greenglass hearts  
and untamed thunder, they  
dance past the left hand of light,

air still, time slack,  
as the sun ticks  
and the rain hums *take it easy*.

Past the eyes of the forest,  
the tongues of the sea, they drift  
over earth's spine

timing steps to ghost music  
where love spins its web in a wind  
anchored in thorns.

## **The Moon Inside**

1

Women know how to wait.  
They smell the dust,  
listen to light bulbs dim  
and guard the children  
pale with dreaming.

They hear danger  
tapping along walls,  
sidewalks sinking  
and edges of the city

bruising the landscape.  
Down long corridors  
they whisper to each other  
of alarm bells

and balanced crosses,  
of shrouded eyes and empty stars  
while the moon inside them  
takes a slow, silver breath.

2

She keeps pulling him up  
from the bottom of the Red River  
in stop action or slow motion  
and replays the splash  
blooming around his hips.

She corrects his dive,  
restores the promise  
of his form, each movement  
clear in the instant of falling.

The moment reversed,  
she reels him up  
to where he's still  
sitting on the bank.

Now, mother covers her scalp  
with hair torn by its roots.  
Screams sucked back into her mouth  
become soft syllables again.

Her shredded clothes re-woven.  
The table set for his return.

3

As the body's laid out,  
she stands at attention  
waiting for the clearest light  
and then sharpens her instruments.

First, the eyes removed  
to see what was seen,  
ears probed to hear what was heard  
then the heart dissected  
to find what was missing.

It takes time to cut tenderly  
into the bone and sinew  
of the past,  
each knife stroke  
a loving incision.

There is no entrance.  
Only entering.  
When the body's exposed,  
she climbs inside,  
pulls closed the flaps of skin  
and slowly heals herself.

4

In her kitchen, she knows  
each blunted blade, worn handle, broken tip,  
the past compressed in steel.

Along with sacramental noise of cups knocking,  
lips smacking, she hears carving knives and cleavers  
splitting days into edible proportions.

Skillful at the cutting board, she pays her  
vegetable tithes to the crock pot, the salad,  
the wok, slices and slices into the heart of things.

Familiar knives carve her into chunks served up  
for family supper. From the scraps and bones  
she makes a broth and feeds herself.

5

She lay sprawled on the table  
between a pitcher of milk  
and stained napkin. A giant  
sponge swept her crumbling parts  
over the edge. Before dis-  
appearing into the dust pan,  
she remembered how simple  
life had been between the curved  
fork and serrated knife.

6

Nineteen-thirty was a long,  
cold childhood wedged into a scar  
and food that filled half  
the cupboard. She'd lick  
the pencil stump and make her lists.  
Each item considered, written, erased,  
re-written according to what jingled  
in the broken tea pot.

at six o'clock, she always  
listened to the news and groaned,  
her body a vast burial ground for  
victims of plagues, revolutions,  
wars, each groan another corpse.  
She stood ironing, every stroke  
a preparation for the burial,  
a straightening of limbs,  
a smoothing of features,  
a final act of love.

7

a convention of women facing out  
into the lens  
picnics birthdays  
all swimming to the surface  
of the acid bath  
a procession of cardboard moments  
poorly focused with here and there  
an empty space  
like a prediction



## **Crosscutting the Years**

Before the dream evaporates,  
the paint flakes or fades,  
my father sheathed in callouses  
hefts the hammer  
pounds each nail into  
its proper place making  
sound music from sound noise.

His days hinge together.  
Mornings he wakes early,  
shakes the furnace down,  
opens dampers and the fire  
blazes as she squeezes juice,  
cooks porridge and listens  
to those noisy seven overhead.

A building permit's his safe-  
conduct to the future  
where he's a week-end revo-  
lutionary, reads *The Daily  
Worker*, saws and hammers outside  
in the winter with his union card  
warming his vest pocket.

When his sander strips time  
down to its clean edge, he  
leaves the city Fridays  
to soak in the lake or  
sit in the sun building sand  
castles with his children.

He looks for structural fatigue  
in his marriage. With her it's always  
20 below. The weather has its reasons  
and so does she, always busy  
sweeping her days free of his sawdust,  
of his fingerprints at night.

His drill digs deep  
exposing the bitter past:  
mother dead and he apprenticed  
to a carpenter at nine,

the ocean crossing and the stench  
of steerage when he was seventeen,  
laying railroad tracks  
and sleeping in unheated box cars  
until a worker froze.

His mitre box builds secrecy  
of corners. There, he hides  
his mandolin, strums it  
with his amputated finger  
or switches off the buzz saw  
to hear silence grow.

His wedge separates the hours, pries  
a little extra time into his life,  
a chance to listen to Caruso  
after supper, play a game of  
checkers or hum Light Opera Gems.

His ruler measures out our  
jump-rope days until each  
hour expands. His sharp eye  
and a T square keep us level.  
And when he stops his work  
to wave, we all wave back.

His saw crosscuts the years.  
Now, he hears his children  
singing, smells the scent  
of wood shavings and glue,  
wakes each morning,  
feels his heart beat fast.

His screwdriver tightens  
tendons, ligaments and bones  
that give him strength  
to build our house from memory  
and deep in the house's heart  
he makes a room for each of us  
with a window's width of light.

Now, we're safe inside  
as if time were nothing at all.

## **Practicing the Seasons**

### I

Under frosted lens of sky, farms  
doze, furrowed in snow. Winter's  
camouflage covers the town and levels  
stumps of the past.

She lives on the back porch  
of time fixed in that perfect tense  
like a bird hanging midair  
frozen inside the moment.

A double thickness of day  
bound together with double seams  
one stitched and gray and visible  
looping threads of the other  
into the weave until morning's  
shot through with green.

The season at odds within her  
she listens to her heart  
on its secret slope  
or watches a bird  
in bent-winged flight  
and feels the world holding still.

A week of small invasions  
drizzle  
slush of passing cars  
pigs rooting through wood chips  
a horse blocking the path at midnight  
and she's a child again practicing spring.

II

The raw yoke of summer  
smears mouths and chins as birds  
hanging on drafts shatter the air with calls  
She watches buds nipping up from branches  
leaves scattering grace notes  
while the breeze teaches April to sing cuckoo.

Earth cushions footfalls of animals  
along pathways in the forest  
saved for silence.  
Since she's the first to wake  
it all belongs to her  
worm voices  
weed voices  
trees riddled with stunned beginnings  
crisp syllables of rain  
and the long, lazy horizon.

She's wrapped in strips of light  
her body wild as vines.  
Light slices open mornings  
and days drift past  
as she lies flat all summer  
in the wilderness of daily things.

Animals move in toward her house  
snakes slip through hedges  
rodents sieve the lawn  
and the shadow of a wing  
covers the wall.

They inhabit her nights  
signaling with sharp claws  
until the bloodrush  
in a flood of dreams.

III

Heat blisters the surface of the pond.  
Banks yield to the anarchy  
of weeds and wild flowers  
silver-plated by the sun.

Wrapped in gauze of sleep, she  
listens for night to roost  
for dawn to streak the sky  
for harmonics from the past.

She says yes to rain's slanted messages  
and the language of warm winds, yes  
to the sun blooming in her body  
with a promise more permanent than love.

The sun's a shawl of burning.  
Nothing stirs.  
Haloed by calm  
brush stroked by light  
ambushed by birdsong  
she breathes slow breaths  
as animals crazy with life  
race through undergrowth.

When dusk holds the earth  
firmly in place with  
long lean stains of sunlight  
she sleeps, dreams  
and wakes      saved for another death.

Light grows old but noon still holds  
the smell of spring. Scent of hay  
drifts from a nearby field. Trees  
blaze in a stagger of reds and golds.  
Branches beat brown tattoos.  
She recalls the summer glories  
the blood's ascension  
and she could be alive in any century.

IV

On scrubbed autumn days, nothing grows  
but absence. She's at the pond  
sighting wild geese overhead  
and the sun trapped in ripples.

Along pond's perimeter a silence  
waits for winter. Slow currents  
prod a scum of leaves  
from one shore to another.

On the path, a spent cartridge  
lies half-buried  
a shred of sunlight  
caught in its plastic shell.

Her spacious season  
kindling and simmering, cools.  
Frost sets in with its brittle stalks  
and heapings of salt hay. Winds  
blow in the same bare place. Winter's breath  
adds another layer to the year  
as though this northern reach  
were all that's left of earth  
and she surrenders to the population of the snow.

The weather vane grinds on its swivel.  
Her eye blots out images of green  
finds comfort in bare limbs.  
A snowflake resting in her palm  
makes of her life a moment  
back to frost-thinned moonlight  
and a twilight of voices humming  
love songs, birth songs, death songs.  
All the melodies she left behind  
return and take her into their arms.

She watches grass grow blades of ice  
and follows her reflection in the window  
like a star that sees beyond its own light  
for the first time.

## **Night's Other Country**

Before the great winds and the white noise  
of night, we'll cut loose from clocks and  
stand in fields spread out to nowhere singing mantras.

Before the quiet waits in garments of goodbye,  
we'll bridge the silence of guitars  
and float sound to its center.

Before hours burn to ash, we'll wrap ourselves  
in wind, in raw strips of light,  
our bodies wild as vines.

Before land's end, we'll swim in all the rivers  
of the sky, and drown in sunlight,  
inhaling love as sweet as candlewick.

Before our final season, let it be summer  
resonant with wings, vermouth of old sunrises,  
mountains growing slowly in the rain

the light around us ripe and round  
and if it dies out, let it be extravagant,  
a marvel of darkness in night's other country.

## About the Poet:



**Ruth Daigon** is a singer/editor/performance/poet. Her books include *The Moon Inside* (Gravity/Newton's Baby Press, 2000), *Between One Future And The Next* (Papier-Mache Press, 1995) and *The Greatest Hits of Ruth Daigon 1970-2000* (Pudding House Press), which is part of their Gold Chapbook Series. Her forthcoming poetry collection is called *Handfuls of Time* (Cedar Hill Publications). Her chapbook, *Payday At The Triangle*, (Small Poetry Press Select Poets Series), based on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, 1911, was published in 2001. It is available from Small Poetry Press, P.O. 5342, Concord, CA 95424 or Ruth Daigon, 86 Sandpiper Circle, Corte Madera, CA 94925. Single copy \$9.00 (includes postage).

Her prizes include the Greensboro National Poetry Prize 2000 (Greensboro Arts Council), The Ann Stanford Poetry Award (University of Southern California, 1997), The Eve of St. Agnes Award (Negative Capability, 1993, 1994), and Kimera's chapbook prize. Her latest publications include *ForPoetry*, *Conspire*, *Poetry Repair Shop*, *Ste. 101*, *Kota Press*, *Perihelion*, *Zuzu's Petals*, *WebDelSol*, *Kimera*, *Switched-On Gutenberg*, *Heaven Bone*, *Maelstrom*, *Southern California Anthology*, *A Room of One's Own (Canada)*, *The MacGuffin*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Alaska Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Cumberland Poetry Review*, *Bellingham Review*, and the *Chester H. Jones Anthology*.