

## JATAKA TALES

From my life as a Christian peasant,  
I cross my forehead and chest solemnly after kneeling.  
From my life as a Sioux, “All my relations.”  
From my life as a Jew, I curse God in the daylight,  
then steal back at night to kneel in the moon.  
From my life as dust, I call all things father  
and no place home. From my life as water,  
I can rest only in the lowliest places.  
From my life as a traveling salesman,  
I can’t stop talking or dreaming of maps,  
but from my life as a stone, I have yet to speak.  
From my life as a Russian street sweeper  
I eye women carrying bags of groceries  
with suspicion. From my life as a clergyman,  
all the tears of a body, more than the sea.  
From my last life as rain, this endless longing  
for the roots of the earth and a woman’s shadow.  
And, again, from my life as dust, this muted yes,  
this meaningless assent to all things.

## WALT

Amid the bustling shipyards, he walks:  
crates and bare-chested men, that's all he sees.  
Slowly, I have to tell him, point out  
how all the men are fully dressed,  
everything hefted by a giant crane.

But already he has run ahead. When I find him  
in the market, he is clapping his hands  
watching children dance around a fiddler.  
“Walt,” I say, “we’re in a modern shopping mall.”

I watch the children disappear from his face.  
We are standing in Hot Topic;  
someone is selling a thirteen-year-old girl  
a studded dog collar and a midriff shirt.

We walk on through the Gap, Penney's:  
glittering handbags, lingerie, cargo pants.  
In the electronics aisle of Sears, he collapses  
to the floor, before a bank of TVs.

I look at him, a broken man now  
like the rest of us, crying, ashamed.  
He tells me he wants to be alone.  
I don't know where he goes

wandering—through a single rose,  
along a kelson of grief,  
down the avenues of the nineteenth century?  
I wait the night in an empty parking lot.

When he returns, he tells me we must sing.

## SONG: INFERNAL

I was lost in the middle of my life  
when the planes hit the towers,  
lost in the middle of my life  
when the glass gods, one at a time, cowered

and fell, when a bomb of blue sky  
exploded a bride where she stood—  
I was lost in the middle of my life,  
far from a leopard, far from a dark wood—

when the night clerk at Circle K  
handed me back too much change,  
I was lost in the middle of our life's way,  
when an army of wings arranged

on flatbed trucks brushed past me on the road,  
I was lost in the hallways of a glass dream,  
trying to find my way out to the ground  
turning in circles, crying secretly

in green languages, unknown even to me—  
far from a lion, far from a dark wood—  
with armfuls of Fritos, and ribs, and iced tea,  
and web pages circling through my blood.

There were wires all around, and siren wails  
and people running about, bereft and intent  
as I. I didn't know whether to stay still  
and wait for my life to grow transparent

there in my chair, with the sprinklers overhead  
like golden showers of sorrow  
and emergency lights flashing red  
up and down the hall

or whether to run madly from stairwell  
to stairwell, kissing women's knees  
and the foreheads of men, drunk on cries for help  
beseeching and singing and weeping

entering one life after another  
and leaping from each one. Yes, I  
was lost in the middle of the tower  
when I came upon my life.

## CITY OF LIES

In the city of lies, I felt the sunlight  
become a lie. I felt the water  
like my own body, the current's warm  
rapture and sway that became my body  
become a lie. And where the sun  
touched the water, it became a thousand lies  
that walked about the streets  
and one of them was me. I felt my hand become a lie,  
my feet, my wrist, my mind, my collarbone;  
my spine, my testicles, my ass,  
until all that was left, if I could find it,  
was my heart, buried under newspapers and plastics.  
And when at last I reached it, I asked about  
my feet, my penis, my hands. I asked about the water  
and the sun, and one by one it returned  
them to me. The heart which could not be lost  
because the lie that was told about the heart,  
through one lone act of grace, happened to be the truth.