Telling Time

I keep certainty
through strange ways
of telling time:

the cranes Marjorie taught me
to fold, gathered in a box:
gold and blue wings rustling
in the time of healing.

A taper candle for the eve
of autumn’s equinox,
to light my beloved’s path
while I sing the difficult sutras
of farewell.

Even the morning star
and the habit of rising at five
to find the day’s measure
of peace by counting
from one to ten.
Coming home,
I have declared grief—
setting the clock
in the strangest of ways:

To sleep through dark
and endure my loss,
to will rain, dripping
without end and let the frogs
croak down the untended pond.

Until this morning when
a sparrow rested on the sill,
promising to declare sunrise
if I ask the bird to beat its wings.

And for all that a sparrow
brings, I write this poem.

Gestures
(after Marguerite Yourcenar)

Into a hole that is
Either Nothing or God—
But always, and in time,
A hand will cast away
All this love: hurled down
The sprinting torrents
Or on edge of faithless winds
To believe that all
Will be forgotten at last.
Save that today, the heart
Rules out that what it meets
At the turn of the road
Is just an accident of well-
Angled shadows and the late light,
But takes without shame
Every gesture that God
Bothers to return:

Shapes of hard-won glances,
Embraces, and kisses
Turned into beautiful things,
Like the outspoken stillness
That waits where the road turns
And the corn field's hemmed—

In leaf by slender leaf
Bent in fire-orange light,
Shaking the risen stalks
To sweetness,
The blooming tops calling
The grains to fullness:
To be plenty, yellow, and ripe

And the lushness really more
Than my eyes can ever take—
An unowned bounty,
A sudden blessing run wild.
Heartlight

Sometimes, like desert wanderers
we search the evening:

fragrance of the spring rain,
mantle of bluegreen morning,
or sand shelter—to sleep
without firelight or tent.

We unravel the sky’s paths,
borrowing the seafarer’s heart.

Aquarius tilts her jug,
pouring the orient and occident
of tides—earthward the light-years, awesome like love.

Between the errand of hands,
a glance while grinding the wheel,
writing the poem, shaping the jug.

We ask for the constancy
of light.

With clay, leaf, red,
sandalwood, or silence,
we shape whatever
the hands love

while heading for the golden bend,
waiting for our weary lives
to meet the heartlight,

and, like the night sky,
be sanctified.
From A Window

And bright like dewdrops falling,
The rain betrays the day
While the heart loses its bid
To be like steel.

It's just a heart
Turned homeless and unwise
Or why did it listen to a bird,
Stranded on a wet bough?

Betrayed creature
With wise man's eyes—

Does it feel
Its milkwhite feathers wet,
Or the gray afternoon
Break its wings
With painful chill?

And if, in truth, it knows
And need some shelter—

The lonely gaze
Betrays its wanderings,
Recalls a home beyond
Recall, but lost all day
To this weather,
Forbidding flight
From pain,

Lending this window
And all the mountains
The rain's slow patter.
For Giulleta Masina

Death becomes a river,  
wide and shining  
with sun gold, today.

And in an instance  
of spring, goldcrests  
show the way.

Sundials declare  
the blooming of rose trees  
and grassflowers.

A caravan waits.

You ride with Zampano,  
wide-eyed waif  
of our wanderings,

to warm with trick or song  
the snowy evening.

Dear, gentle Gelsomina  
you cast jasmines  
which the heart can  
not bear to hoard.

And your candles, Cabiria,  
bought for love’s price,  
your heart—

traded for silver  
worthless as the stranger  
that stole it away.
You walk under
the most watchful moon,
eye of the friendless night

and the innocent dancers,
the drummers, flutist,
and accordion-player
ring around you—

wayfarers on the bend,
seeking love or sadness,

wishing to know what
is, in truth, this most
beautiful evening.