BLACK NOTEBOOK #11, FLANNEL

I was in one of those dark little places where you could buy a regular cup of coffee. It might have been on La Cienega, south of where all the people with tents and the people without tents were sleeping on the sidewalks, and cars and trucks roared by when the lights changed. I wasn't sure why people always said things like this to me, but a woman standing at the counter turned and asked me for five dollars, and I liked her, I didn't say that to her, or why she wanted five dollars or anything like that, but I just gave her six one-dollar bills, and I watched her hand as she took them. It was an old hand with long slender fingers and lines and filigrees smoothed into it the way, I'm told, in France long ago they beat gold into a special finish that told you straight out it came from deep in the earth and was to be admired, no matter what anyone did to it. Her hair was colored a kind of gold, and even silver appeared, but tired and without the shine—I could tell she couldn't do much with it—pulled loosely behind her small ears. And I liked all of that. When she took the money, she said that she didn't really live in this world, and I said, *Why do you say* this *world? There isn't any other one.* She folded the dollar bills and put them in the shirt pocket over her breast. It was a flannel shirt, and it looked good on her. I thought it said things about her. It was checkered green and faded, soft. I could tell it had been washed a lot. It looked like it had done a good day's work warming her body. It wasn't so different from my own shirt. She said, *LA is just another idea, you know,* and I said, *Yes, yes, I know that, I know exactly what you mean,* and she looked at me for a while, and then she said, *You're always going to be just a little boy, honey,* and I couldn't tell if she meant that as a good thing or not, but I said, *Yes, yes,* to that, too. There wasn't any reason for it. She lit a cigarette and passed it to me. *Go ahead,* she said. *It doesn't mean nothing if you smoke in here.* I took the cigarette from her, a filter. I liked that my lips were pressed around where hers had been. We passed it back and forth a couple of times, and then she turned back to the counter. I hadn't left myself enough money for my own coffee, but I didn't say anything. I turned and walked through the narrow glass door and into the noise and riot of the street, and everything was fine. Everything seemed just about right to me.

QUAHOGS

It was for the wind as much as anything.
It was for the tidal flats, for the miles of bars
and the freezing runs between them,
blued and darkened in the withering gusts.
For the buckets, for the long-tined rakes.
For our skin burning and the bones
beneath, all their ache. For the bent backs,
for the huddle toward warmth beneath
our incapable layers, how we beat
ourselves warm with our arms. The breath
we blew, the narrow steam that spun away.
How we searched their tell-draggle marks.
Then the feel of them as we furrowed.
It was surgery and force together. Like stones,
opal or pearl or plain rock, ugly except
they were beautiful, their whorls and
purple stains. The bucket's wire cutting
with their weight. For the sky blazing, its
sinking orange fire. For the sky's black streaks
with night rising, winter-sudden. Back,
shoreward, home, the tide creeping like a wolf.
For the little stove warming, its orange fire.
The old pot, the steam, the air in savor,
the close room, the precious butter, the
blue fingers throbbing, our bodies in all
the customs of weariness, the supper,
succulent of the freezing dark sea come up,
its happiness, its domain immeasurable.
It was for the hunger.

SOMETIMES GOD SAVES THE FIRE

And I would light myself afire for a poem if I thought it would
light *you* afire, the way I dreamed once that the river burned
beyond 10th Avenue, and the young girls came selling their roses
and carnations all along the banks, while the black smoke rolled
into the sky, and the people crowded the buildings' roofs and iron
ladders and watched with their hands shading their naked eyes.
What was it that made this life seem like just one long convalescence
from a nameless plague brought over from an island on the other
side of sleep? I don't remember passage on any ship. I stole among
the living, weak and unknown, the drift and rhapsody of the avenues,
the shadow buildings lining the canyons of the lateral streets, glass
and brick everywhere, streets where a king might walk, offering you
small gifts, though none ever came. When you find your heart is no
longer high and pure, can you say it ever was? My abiding shame.
Sitting in solitude that winter without human comfort among pads
of cheap onion paper and secondhand books. What kind of freak?
That city once. That Westside with all its little markets and ghosts
and doom. Those long poems, if that's what they ever were, all lost,
and the old black Underwood, too, its frayed ribbon and glass keys
and every thread and artifact. And now, fires unto fire, here
in LA, the long whistle of a train heading down to the port, 4:13 a.m.,
lying awake, rolling fog, and I'm still wandering in the chronic rage
under the vanished awnings of 10th Avenue, all its closed doors and
lost nights. What am I therefore who would raze whole cities for you
if I only had the power in my stuttering hands? 10th Avenue, five floors,
how I would walk up the sagging stairs, the banisters hand-worn to
a dull shine, the little room, the windowsill's infatuate grit, the ancient
radiator, its creamy paint, its glaze and ticking, all the fire and all the
resurrections—a poster taped to the closet door, the cluttered table by
the narrow bed, a hallway of dreams and fever, a small lamp burning.

IT WAS SO DARK INSIDE THE WOLF

All day with nothing on my mind, the soft old couch,
the heating pad, a book of Tennessee Williams's letters,
tea, camembert, beer, soup, dozing, speaking in tongues
off in my drowsing mind, invoking this or that god, thinking
of raising my fortunes, thinking of all of this swimming forward
without me someday, this bag of small wishes, the greatest
sorrows indelible and indistinct in the afternoon's haze:
I cannot remember who said that our salvation must come
from a turn within our own nature and that there are no turns
and there is no nature. *Oh, it was so dark inside the wolf* said
the little girl with the basket after the hunters had killed
that beast who had eaten her, after they had cut him open to
let her out, although you don't hear *that* version so often anymore.
Surely this is significant. Who hasn't lodged in the belly
of something, who hasn't been devoured? Do you remember?
Maybe it is something for you like an old tune that haunts you,
that makes you so suddenly sad when you see a place where
the carpet is coming up or where the screen door is sagging
on a desperate hinge. Unbearable, this material music dissipating
the neighborhood around you into nothing. How does one rise
from this torpor and say, *I don't know what to do anymore?*
Outside the trees have sneaked above the line of the neighbor's
wall. How did I not notice? They make a tiny forest along
our city driveway. They are as dark and deep as it gets here.
I am still crying to rise up from the loveliness of dying objects
into the loveliness of whatever it is they point to. I'm trying
to get at just how things are, to adjust to that, but then I start
shaking. Isn't that how it is with you? It *was* so dark inside,
but that's not the whole story. They are leaving something out.
I can feel it in the sleepless night when I run my hands over
the openings in doorways. I can feel it when my own heart
delivers all my secrets to my enemies. I can feel it when
the poem doesn't turn but heads for the bottom with a hook
in its mouth or when the sky runs to the color of tin and
the sparrows disguise themselves as leaves in the hedge waiting
for their moment. Isn't that how it is with you?

THE LEMONS

Forget the sun and the dizzy moths.
Forget the pieces of mockingbird that the cats have left by the side gate.
Forget the hose running under the honeysuckle:
The lemons are offering us holiness again.
They are making us go down on our knees to smell them.
They are making us think of our old loves, to grieve over them.
They are singing every little song, they are conjuring every temptation.
They have been having sex with the oranges and tangerines, the yard
is rife with their pollens, they are sweeter than they even know.
They speak together. They are amazing me with their navels and nipples.
How they flaunt themselves on the spider-veined limbs all pained with thorn.
They are trying to make me lazy, to turn me against my simple work—
they do not want to be plucked from their own dreaming.
They are telling us again how they come each year, bringing secrets
from their other world, and how we are never able to decipher them.
How long now before we put up the aluminum ladder
and pull on the leather-palmed gloves? How long with the shape
and heft of lemon voluptuous in my hand? How long
with the summer in its steep track, and the low cars cruising
out on the avenues, and the drone of the small airplanes
like bees over the far houses?

CROWS

One of the great February storms,
bales of snow packed along the yards
and roads, and the woods waist-deep
where we waded and wallowed in the old
men's boots, carefully skirted
the blanked ponds and dragged
our duffels to the hut we had made
all summer and fall, where we'd wedged
the crate-wood roof over the split-pine
beams and thatched it with needles
and cadged a stove from the dump
and hinges for the door. Night
we huddled in sleeping bags, burned
green wood, slept toward dawn
and woke early, the world white
and silent, cracked a fire
and cooked eggs, loaded our rifles,
and high in the pines the crows
grew heedful, their bodies smoldering
and the sky squalling in their yellow throats,
God, God, God, shaking the wet powder
from the uppermost trees when they sprang
into the sober air and dipped and rose
and settled beyond the close hills,
still calling their noise to one another,
to the heavy woods, to nothing at all.

AUGUST

I wanted to show her the dawn
coming up over Truro, I wanted
the sky pulled down
like crepe after a dance.
She wanted me to be Odysseus
and tell her stories of that war
I went off to. She thought
my beard was strange, that I
had been wounded in some deep place
and she wanted to give me something.
August will make you drunk some nights,
gin and touching, the kind of talk
you stumble into, her idea
that two people who are not lovers
can keep something of the world
for themselves, the idea
that something taken from the world
could ever correspond exactly
with what is in any one of us—and more,
that we might recognize this when it happens.

For August the memory is perfect,
the places we touched, the grace
of scattered light drifting
over her cheeks, the runnels
of sand in her black hair,
the way she sucked at the air
after a rush of words,
and then the graying
of the sky down to the east
and the smell of bread as we rapped
on the bakery window
and took hot loaves back to the shore
where a single fishing boat awash in light
pulled a skin of gulls across the harbor,
its diesel thumping like a heart.