

Thanatopsis

*"after death there are two alternatives, both
heartless:
memory and forgetfulness."*

— Jon Anderson

I glided sideways through my rib cage,
ducking and stepping high from habit
though I had no breakable skull or
stubbable toes to dash on bones.
Once outside, I spread my pinions
wide to hug the air kept from me
all my life by prisoning skin.
Doled out oxygen in breaths
taken by a swinish mouth
always swilling food and drink,
I had never felt real wind gusts
such as howled now through my fabric,
shredding me like a bubble blown up
inexpertly by a toddler.
My ideas attached to leaves
tumbling over sharp, dry grass blades;
my emotions, caught in updrafts,
quickly swept up to the clouds.
Only memory resisted
amalgamation with the elements,
clotting to a mercury droplet
while my range changed into lightning
and my thoughts mixed with manure.
Mirrored outward from this droplet,

skeletons of trees danced wildly
underneath a blackening sky.
But inside its silvery surface
nothing flashed back but itself
in a billion glittering facets.
Spiraling dizzily I circled
galleries of portraits of me
fumbling footballs under street lights,
spilling beer in bowling alleys,
cheating on a high school French test,
slouching in limp green fatigues
while my sergeant ripped my stripe off
for reporting late to duty.
Hung inside the arching entrance
of the dome of friends and lovers,
my first date sneered from her frame,
while my grade school classmates grinned down
from the ceiling like crude putti
slapped up by apprentice painters.
Where's the room of Flemish masters?
I'd have asked if I'd had language,
not just images to think with.
Where's the charming wedding portrait
and the gems of genre painting
featuring cats on my blue plush sofa?
Staring down implacably,
teachers, bosses, rivals, critics
plunged their danger stares through metal
atmosphere that held me like aspic.
Horried, I tried to screen out
hostile images but had no
eyelids or fleshy hands to block them.
Lacking a mouth and tongue, I couldn't
cry out that my body's prison
was an airy nest compared
to the dungeon of my memory.
So I floated, dim and wordless,
past the hostile glares of children,
hurt looks of neglected parents,

teary eyes of those I'd slighted,
rising to a brightly curving
ceiling blank as untouched canvas.
"Let me out!" cried a lost hope,
yearning towards its friends in the clouds.
Then the roof became a skylight.
Through it, lightning lit the world
I could have if I would give up
all I'd been and known. I paused
long enough to feel regret
flash through me like burning niter
as I beat my wings and leapt
into the idiot serene.