

The Grave's not just the body's curse;
 no skeleton can make a verse!
 So while this numbered World we see,
 let's sweeten Time with poetry,
 and Time, in turn, may sweeten Love
 and give us time our love to prove.
 You've praised my eyes, forehead, breast;
 you've all our lives to praise the rest.

SAPPHICS FOR PATIENCE

But there—something rests on your hand and even
 lingers, though the wind all around is asking
 it to leave you. Passing the windy passage,
 you have been chosen.

Seed. Like dust or thistle it sits so lightly
 that your hand while holding the trust of silk gets
 gentle. Seed like hope has come, making stillness.
 Wish in the quiet.

If I stood there—stopped by a windy passage—
 staring at my hand—which is always open—
 hopeful, maybe, not to compel you, I'd wish
 something like patience.

JOAN AUSTIN GEIER ON WRITING FORMAL POETRY

For me, formal composition involves an extra challenge. Can I take a rigid vessel (usually a form originated centuries ago) and fill it with living, fluid poetry? Like the ongoing relationship between water and its retainers, the experience can be peaceful or exhilarating, powerful, sometimes fearful. I am much indebted to poet Alfred Dorn for an understanding of modern and traditional poetics, and for inspiration in adapting contemporary techniques to metrical/formal poetry.

ON YOUR TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY

My son, you are a sweet bitter shadow
 among the fuschia blossoms of sibling
 roots and vines; a silent tornado
 in my breast; the bottled genie scribbling
 this line—but I will not have you crippling
 my breath, nor will I sit with vacant stare
 fingering pain. I will rise from this chair

and prepare an ordinary meal.

I wonder what it would have been. Might there be a special pasta on the table? I feel an odd disconnection with what I see—your smiling father, brothers, sister. We joke and pass the platters. It's the same throughout the meal. I do not say your name

as if you matter less than the ragout.
 But I don't forget the blue-born flower
 I never saw. Darling, I remember you,
 your frightened squirming as I gnawed each hour,
 worried, tense. Was I your destroyer?
 Had I sent joy, you'd have waited, surely,
 not come with diseased lungs, prematurely,
 a cord-strangled, prenatal suicide.
 Green phantoms forced a cup upon my nose
 and as I flailed and sank I cried,
 "Save my baby." Gassed blind, I prayed and rose
 to surgical light. Need for you unfroze me,
 left me screaming, clutching, crying.
 The nurse said you were blue and likely dying.

You fought three hours; then your father came
 to my clean, white bed above the river.
 I told him I'd given you his name.
 His eyes glistened, spilled. My son, your father's
 tears are rare. I bless them, my lover's
 gift, the sweet kernel that lies beneath the husk.
 I knew he loved us both. That was enough
 to strengthen me through the visitors.
 The doctor, weary, not a bit like God,
 asked permission to look inside you. Tears
 choked, twisted my tongue. I could only nod
 you over to the knife, taking that odd
 chance that someday life would redeem
 your death. The knife, the wound, the scream
 inside. I turned away, unencumbered
 by you. No need now to tuck a pillow
 beneath a fruitful belly. You are remembered
 in cans and can'ts. I can turn. I can't will you
 back. I can smile again, but, little fellow,

I can't find you though I can spryly caper
 like a neurotic chimp around the paper
 springing rhythms, slanting rhymes among the facts.
 Where are you now, small flesh of my flesh?
 "We will bury him in a small, white box,"
 the Grey Lady said, "wrapped in a white plush
 blanket." Out loud, I made a wish
 to have one glimpse before you were entombed.
 She blinked, didn't answer. Were you reworded
 already (and she too kind to tell me),
 a bottled curio, displayed in formaldehyde
 in some lab? I know I always will be
 derelict, the need to know you unsatisfied.
 Each time I tried to ask again I cried.
 The simple, necessary words never came
 and I drew my sheets around me like shame.
 This evening an almost familiar face slips
 among the candles, a teasing young man
 tall as your brothers; around his lips
 a twinkle, a taste for strawberry jam.
 I know you when you come, I sense your name.
 But last night, in the corner of a room
 that once was mine, I watched the red moon climb
 over an empty, yellow bassinet
 and heard a phantom baby's plaintive wail.
 My breasts ached to feed it. In the dim light
 your father's naked shoulders seemed not real.
 I touched his back softly, softly and kept still.
 Somewhere bottled up, right now, a hunger twists
 under sealed eyelids. There is anger in your small fists,
 and between us scorched distances of wishes.
 I blow the candles and rise to clear the dishes.