

## THE TRANSIENTS

(I)

After my son died in the war  
I wore his hat and vest  
His leather bracelets  
His ring his dog tags his jacket  
I clutched everything I could

Of his vanishing spirit  
I wore his vestments  
Like a swathe  
On a wound that wouldn't heal  
Commemoration was my mission

(II)

Death is not a stranger  
But grief is an orphan  
I had no desire to let go  
Of a sinking compulsion  
I dove into the undertow

(III)

Diaspora never ends  
Every transient understands  
The arc of justice bends  
Toward the pinnacles of power  
Time is no healer

Every wanderer confronts

A moral judgement  
Who are you to defy order  
Who are you to deny conformity  
The Gilded Moral

Give to the poor  
What they feel the poor  
Do not deserve  
Transients haunt  
The streets of America

Worthless disposable but  
Permanent and irrevocable  
As the automaton of profit  
Defiles every torso beggared  
On the crossroads of America

(IV)

I wore the vestiges  
Of my son's death  
Like a cape of commitment  
To transients whom Capital  
Can neither capitalize nor consume

America cannot tolerate on its face  
Slavery massacre genocide  
Abandoned toxic wastelands  
Losers have their place in the order  
In my isolation I recognized my standing

I wore my grief until my face  
Was inscrutable as ancient languages  
Etched in stone with tools crude as pain  
One face among many faces  
Trespassing the plains of America's desolation

(V)

Faces of transients  
Older than the memories they contain  
Lines chiseled around the mouth and eyes  
With blunt voices and words of disdain  
Faces scuffed like soles

Faces that live up to names they are called  
Faces that can't fake it at all  
Faces that lack all expectation  
Faces that spit and expect spit back  
Faces that cry like ice when they crack

Slugged faces  
Shut up faces  
Faces that turn faces away  
Faces afraid they'll be called on to say  
Who they are and why

They have arrived here now  
Faces that gave up long ago  
And go on just to say I told you so  
Faces dumb as barrels  
Faces dull as door knobs

Faces bleak as bent nails  
Faces that scratch your eyes out  
With a glance  
Faces that won't let you forget  
Faces that don't have a chance

And don't know it yet  
Faces deserted like scenes of disaster  
Faces in control of the pain

Faces like windows wet with rain  
Faces you can read yet never explain

Faces that grieve  
Faces that grovel  
Faces blunt as the grave digger's shovel  
Faces in mirrors  
Faces on fire

My face as I face  
The naked desire  
Of America's grief  
And tremble like a thief  
In the light

Gregg Shotwell