

From *Darwin's Butterfly* (2009 Pushcart nomination):

It had been his favorite place that—the kitchen garden. He recalled the cool darkness of the fig trees, the burgundy glow of the plum. He remembered the orchard during the summer, the green and gold and red of it beneath the dreaming sky. Within those walls the rose had grown by the vine, the herb among the fare; there the beds had ambled, not marched. By night he would climb the wall and gaze down into it like an exile at the border of a forbidden land. He would watch the moonlight meeting the shapes of the fish in the pond, would imagine things in the dark and pensive places. And when he would leave to return to the house, in spite of the fruit gathered with his pilfering stick, he would leave dissatisfied, for the way inside was always too far down.

From *Of Woman Born*:

The cloud pressed on the shoulders of the city like rock on the bearers of a mine. Beneath, within the metropolis of brown on gray and gray on black, it might have been night or day or neither—a time in which the sun had ceased to be and the stillness of the sunless hours surrendered to the distant rumble of war.

Though man had constructed this landscape, it was no place for him. For surely no man could live suffocated from the sky by this cloud of smog, among these shells of an industry that had long since fallen. Man born of woman did not belong here—between these crumbling pavements and dead, rusted things—man of soft feet, of subtle hand, no man born.

And yet here was evidence of man—in the orange lights of the shanty houses; in the trucks that shunted on the roads; even in the pooling streetlights could be seen man, or something like him, yet baleful, furtive, as much shadow as that cast by his form.

And here, further out, where the lights dwindled so that the streets gleamed with the phosphorescence of the clouds, someone walked. It was a woman.

Her tunic hung loose at her shoulder, hair fraying over eyes in greasy strings. Beneath her breasts her belly swelled with the threat of birth. Her steps seemed like those of a wind-up toy—drunken, mechanical, bare feet sluicing through puddles, scattering broken glass.

The wind joined her on the road, whipping her skirt and rousing a kind of ramshackle music among the wreckage—the clang of loose iron, the brittle tinkling of rusted chain. To this dissonance the shadows danced, swaying with the hinged swing of an open door, sliding with a cat along the street. But she did not turn, did not stop to see the desolate drama of a factory night.

From *The Rat Catcher*:

Though the sun was lost now to the west, its presence endured, encircling the hills in an aureole of diminishing light. In the valley below, the white clay of the road gleamed with it, the alders alongside seemed to cling to themselves traces of it, and when the last of it dwindled away, the keen consciousness could have glimpsed upon the hilltops shapes—a giant sleeping, his face to the sky, a fortress forgotten to time, a lone pilgrim staring to the east—rocks and trees cut strange against the twilight.

In any other valley there would have lingered the cries of birds flying to their rest, or the stir of a creature unfurling from tree or nest to venture beneath the stars. But here, there were none. In this valley, even the cricket dared not scratch out her song. And yet, along the road a lone man walked.

His step was light, and above the drumming of his feet on the clay a haunting melody twined—a tune he whistled as he walked. In his right hand flashed a staff of pale wood, and in his left, so dark it seemed to emanate the night, was a cage draped in cloth. This, he hefted high, breaking his whistle from time to time to whisper through the bars.

And as he walked, the alder gathered with beech and chestnut to become a wood, and the wood swathed the shoulders of the valley till all was dark and close. And nothing could be seen now but the black and blue of the forest, the bone-gleam of the road, and beyond, the glinting stars. But the man paid heed to none of this as he whistled his tune and drummed his staff, and the trees swayed around him and the wind seemed to dance on the way.

From *The Sennachie*:

Bracing his feet against the hull, the fisherman guided the boat over slick swelling waves, between avalanches of foam. The ocean sizzled as rain clouds swept towards him, perforating the surface of the water and turning his hair to milk on his forehead. And as the sea surged and crashed around him, as his little vessel teetered and shuddered and dived, he rode its back as though as much a part of it as a hair on an animal's hide.

His eyes were wide, his mouth a tight knot in the tangle of his beard. He scanned the movement of the water with his head to one side, as though listening to a melody strung between the waves. But when the end of his fishing pole suddenly bent like bow wood, he broke from his watch, dropping the oars to scramble for the line. Too late, he turned to retrieve them, only to stare as they slipped from the boat and dipped into the waves. And as he stood with the pole in his grasp, watching them sweep away, his line gave another sharp pull, and he fell. He teetered over the water as the boat seesawed dangerously close to the waves, the pole slipping to a finger hold in his grasp. Adjusting his grip, he braced himself against the hull, and with a weary heave, regained his footing, steadying the little vessel with his weight.

And then, just as he recovered his seat on the thwart, a great wave closed over him, filling the boat with water that frothed like ale. It rode low on the waves now, its sides barely free of the surf.

The lightening cut the waves out in knife points, the rain into dashing blue spears. He sat with eyes closed, a scintilla of stillness in a world of motion. His hands shook on the pole, knuckles white, and the tendons in his shoulders sagged.