

1981

I learned the word disaster meant against the stars,  
learned it did not apply to this world; the sky intended  
every cruelty.

I watched the boy with no legs draw  
pictures of feet for an hour in Study Hall.

In the hall  
of my uncle's rest home I heard the paper voice of a man  
so old he'd forgotten he was blind. When a nurse passed  
his door, he'd ask "Turn the lights on, would you?"

I learned sadness like a way home from school. I got in  
later and later. Some nights I didn't come back at all  
but sat up waiting for myself.

I passed Geography,  
History, & Spanish for the last time. My cat died.  
My dog turned grey. My physics teacher was hit  
by an ambulance.

But I read a book & understood it.  
A woman asked me to touch her body. I did.

I wrote  
my first poem. It said people were like moons. I believed  
what I wrote, believed I had done all my writing, wouldn't  
do anymore.

Then I believed a book that said the oleanders  
behind our house were poison. All summer I dreamed  
of meeting someone I could feed one brutal flower.

## THE MANAGER

My daughters learned to sing  
in your bathroom. The acoustics  
made them feel famous. Their father  
died cleaning your carpet, though I  
suspect it was the strain of carrying  
your sink up three flights that did it.  
I mourned him & finished the rug.  
My daughters have daughters & they  
pass your door when they visit.  
They wonder if you're nice. I say  
I don't know; simpler than asking  
why it matters. Just as each time  
someone leaves me, the landlord  
doesn't apologize. He offers me  
something smaller & I accept.  
It's how I manage. I make room.

## POEM ENDING ON A LINE

BY THE DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND POWER

Someone is always playing a drum.  
The birds are each a different color  
and the volcano is new. We call this  
the spare bedroom.

Will you be staying long, or don't  
you know yet? You shouldn't  
have any trouble getting to sleep.  
The bed is as soft as the earth.

Please take a moment to fill out  
the questionnaire on your pillow.  
My name is Encyclopedia. If you need  
books or extra blankets, look me up.

There is a tropical storm scheduled  
for this evening. The rain will taste  
of mangoes. If you disagree with water  
and electrical charges, please call.