To a Friend (1969–1971)

I
To make the turning of the day
more like the turning over of sleep
I have turned again to Wyatt
just as the agitation of the journey,
heart spinning on its heels and not speaking,
makes us lie down in the road. O make my bed
both long and narrow, a good dirt road
with the rain falling in our eyes, and the worms will
crawl half across, and maybe a green snake.
But what you said, is why I’m lying here
knowing I have to think — my heart is floating away —
and perhaps, run over by a bicycle,
soon to crawl away in both directions.²

II
When, in minute script, the children write of torture
that must always end with castration, their blank cheeks
and brows will darken only at the after dream:
to wake in terror and find it done,
in a white bed, without desire, surrounded
by loving friends, empty, inconsolable:
with even the fever of torture not to be regained.
Warm children give up, when they sleep,
to the tight blanket and the pillow that makes them blush
the warmth of their dreams and bodies. So that when they rise
they surrender it entirely, the shell of warmth, and go
out trembling. And you, when you collapsed
in the lethal desert, may also have wondered
what would remain after the liquefying sleep.
The years in which Abelard had awakened in your brain
from sudden sounds on the stair, to find it done,
stood over you in a feminine intuition.

² This stanza is crossed out in the manuscript version.
You turn to yourself like a hermaphrodite
and black out in dry-bubbling speculation.

III
Aristotle, tell me please
how is a very small *polis*
different from a very large
hermaphrodite?
Well, you see, it’s partly
a matter of ends. The hermaphrodite has two,
which is hardly natural.

IV
Ah, friend, this fuzzy cactus tongue
must be a joke, a joke about a dream
of the desert: this incongruous, broad flower
a trivial metamorphosis of a traveller
who died in the valley at noon, lacking water
turning and turning in black dreams, as a child
lies still, with all his warm diffusive strength
intending to get up and go to the bathroom.
But no. It is not a flower, not an idle gaping;
it is a manly city that awakes
discrete upon its hill. But on the roofs
wry blackbirds turn and turn inexplicably,
whether we wake or sleep, upon themselves.