When my son wants to be Batman he never needs the whole costume, which is convenient since it exists, if at all, in several undiscovered hiding places throughout the house. In fact, he usually just wears the cape, a black nylon cape that fastens at the neck with Velcro strips. Beneath the cape might be kelly green shorts and his orange Converse All Stars, or his favorite suspender pants that ride two inches above the sandals he sometimes wears with them. Occasionally it’s just a flannel shirt and jeans, but whatever the case, no one asks who he is. Everyone knows. “Hey, Batman,” the teller calls out when we walk in the bank. “Are you Batman?” the bagger asks at the grocery store. The authority is that cape which, in the context of my son’s motley manner of dress, is a fragment.

Jean Valentine’s context is more tonal than situational, but her leaps from fragment to fragment are every bit as authoritative as Batman’s cape; they embody that central energy that makes art life-affirming, even when it is inhabiting grief, and her poems are always memorable, always emblems of recognition. It’s rarely popular culture that we recognize in her work; rather, it’s usually something seemingly incidental, domestic, some fleck in the weave that reminds us of everything and nothing, of being and not being. There is not a shred of nihilism in her poetry, but there’s a whole lot of nothingness. In many ways her work is a reconciliation of several experiments in American poetry (deep imagery, surrealism, minimalism), one that places a plain spoken vernacular at the service of highly essentialized imagery, to the point that narrative is a vague scaffolding: barely there, sometimes suggested, usually inconsequential. What is left is the remnant, like a cape
on a little boy’s shoulders . . . or better yet, a scrap of flag waving from a scorched pole after the explosion: we know exactly what it was, what it was for, even if we don’t know who put it there, what country it represented, what happened to those who believed in it. It is cloth and a few colors. And a thousand stories.

I can’t imagine there is much that hasn’t been said about the power of the poetic fragment, the power of shards and pieces, the resonance of what’s left behind when a good deal of what was once whole has been blown into eternity. And it wouldn’t be accurate to call Jean Valentine’s poetry an *assemblage* of fragments; there is usually too much of a controlling voice present in her poems to allow us a pure engagement with an untethered piece of an unknowable whole. Then again, the same could be said of much of Sappho’s works, which are almost always described as fragments. Here is the opening to Valentine’s “Home” (*Growing Darkness, Growing Light*):

> Breath entering, leaving the leaf
> the lion tense on the branch luxuriant,

> the ten-foot drop to
> the water-hole, the God-taste

> —*that’s* what lights it up,
>  Nature, and Art: your skin feather to feather
>  scale to scale to my skin . . .

So what do we call such spareness, a lyric compression that often results in a sort of nonce syntax, a radical version of *in medias res*? Well, for one thing we could call it mindful of silence, but even that seems evasive, since Valentine’s silences control meaning much as a dream’s dislocated narrative suggests a coherence that rarely persists beyond the first few minutes of wakefulness; in other words, Valentine’s silences seem less like the unsaid and more like the unknown (“. . . we don’t know what is happening to
us, / no more than the dumb beasts of the field”—“Open Heart” from *Growing Darkness, Growing Light*). Which brings us back to fragments.

When Louise Glück talks about the power of broken statuary in her essay “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence” (she is discussing Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo”), she is referring primarily to what can’t be known about the once-whole statue, and how this silence enacts an existential drama via the orchestration of fragments: in the case of statuary, there is a strange valorization of broken beauty that occurs when a maimed and partly recovered relic is mounted on a pedestal in a pristine setting (the Getty for instance, or even the Uffizi Gallery). We walk through rooms of relics collecting inferences and suggestions, and if we’re experienced at this activity we reach less for a sense of the vanquished whole than a sort of faith in the received remnant, which seems to reverberate with beauty, to echo with whispered meaning. But if there is an architecture to poetry it is intensely immediate and dislocating; we rarely notice the bright red Coke can hovering in the hand of a tourist on the far side of the museum exhibit, rarely feel a need to reconcile it with the display of marble torsos and busts. But in Jean Valentine’s poems it is impossible to reside in the rooms of her stanzas without feeling the gravitational pull of discordant fragments, disrupted narratives, truncated glimpses. And, as Cole Swensen has written, “A glimpse suffices to trigger an entirety.”* Swensen is addressing the fragmentary nature of what some have called elliptical poetry, a recent literary movement that is so vaguely defined and so youthfully delimited that its originators would probably not think to address the problem an older poet like Valentine represents to any tidy descriptions of stylistic evolution in recent American poetry. In other words, where does Valentine fit in when so much of what a new generation of poets is doing looks like a less authentic—a problematic

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word, I know—version of what she has been writing for decades: a poem vaguely suspicious of full articulation and closure; a poem privileging both voice and fragmentation; a poem in the service of the unconscious; a poem unconcerned with narrative coherence. The difference, of course, is in the degree of self-consciousness; there is almost none in Valentine, almost nothing but in the elliptical poets, or whatever they are.

Swensen goes on to talk about how the fragment seems an outgrowth of a sort of negative capability, how we have, as a culture, learned to read the fragment with less frustration, just as the writer employing it has learned, as Keats wrote, to be “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” In other words, we’ve caught up with a poet like Valentine, who places enormous trust in the remnants of dreams and memories. She leaves them alone and / or lays them alongside others, certain they belong that way because, in fact, that’s how they arrived in the poem, which suggests something about her process. And, in fact, her poetry often resembles surrealism, even if it never quite commits to that, or any, program. How else to describe the following lines from “New Life”: “B. walks around with a fire-box inside of his chest. / If you get near him it will burn you too. B. says // Don’t let the women go out of our lives like the swallows / leaving only the crows’ liquid leathery reign, domain, stain. (Growing Darkness, Growing Light). Valentine’s is, very nearly, a purely visceral poetry, dictation from an emotionally fueled unconscious; the intellect will be defeated time and again by the sudden drop into dream from a deliberately narrated dramatic situation, the equally disorienting presence of a matter-of-fact voice speaking in clipped, even non-sequential phrases. Here is “Labrador,” in its entirety:

Crossing a fenced-off railroad track
holes in the fence
carrying a dog
my journey
I drop him
he’s heavy I can’t pick him up
he puts his foot in a trap
chained to the track a trap
yes but that dog
won’t chew his foot off
he’s barking at himself he won’t let
me near.
I left him.

(The Cradle of the Real Life)

The last line of this poem suggests something crucial about Valentine’s work: we narrate our dreams in the present tense because they most resemble the lives we actually live moment to moment; that is, they contain the complete history of our presence—our past, our present and our future—and they embody the real truth of our capabilities for understanding. We are at peace with our suffering in dreams, at ease in disorientation, at one with nonsense. The past tense is the voice of consciousness creating theme, containing the uncontainable with statement and meaning. We need consciousness, even if it’s a sort of lie. Valentine’s poetry is more concerned with the truth of the saturated present tense (saturated with memory and hope), of dreams.

Several years ago I wrote an essay that argued that James Tate was not writing postmodern poems but was instead enacting a postmodern way of living that resulted in poems that looked, talked and acted postmodern. My contention was and is that such distinctions matter, though there are many who don’t recognize them at all. But looking around at the many poems published today that display such an intensely willed reflexivity that they seem written from recipes, it seems more important than ever to question the origins of style. I realize I’m revealing a bias, not to mention a quaint fondness for authenticity (or something resembling that), and I can hear just outside the door the legion of poets asking, “So what’s so wrong with writing from a recipe?” And I guess they’re right. But it’s worth noting just how many
poets seem or try to write like, say, John Ashbery, and how few seem to tackle Tate. Why? Well, in all honesty, John Ashbery, whose poetry I treasure, writes poems that are a lot like John Ashbery (they almost all have that remove), so that those who try to write a poem like John Ashbery end up a lot closer to the real thing than even they might imagine. Tate, on the other hand, writes from a place, not a mode; he is never writing in the manner of anything. He walks out the door into his poem. He walks into the living room into his poem. This is not a value judgment. Jean Valentine awakens into her poem, and it too is a place, though one most of us visit in dreams. But we run into trouble with Tate when we ask, “What is this supposed to mean?” as opposed to “What sort of world is this?” which leads to the proper recognition: “Oh yeah, it’s our world without the filters, without the tyranny of sequential logic, the tired predictability of rational thought.” The same is true with Valentine when we ask “How does all this hang together?” instead of recognizing the absences, that we are in the presence of remnants, leftover memories, conjured voices, pieces of dream. The truth of those things is in their lack of wholeness, the fact of their lack. Reading Valentine well involves not reaching after resolution, residing in not knowing, trusting that what is there will suffice, provide the whole without knowing what it is. Those broken pieces of statue don’t remember their missing parts, much as Rilke wants them to, but we do: we remember ours.

But then again, several of Valentine’s poems have nothing to do with disruption, fragmentation or ellipticism. Occasionally her severely compressed narratives sustain a single focus and plot for the duration of the poem. Occasionally she drifts suddenly into statement with the forcefulness of Adrienne Rich:

... I want those women’s lives
rage constraints
the poems they burned
in their chimney-throats
The History  
of the World Without Words  
more than your silver or your gold art.

(The Cradle of the Real Life)

But more often we have the suggestion of narrative, the suggestion of statement, and the assertion of something else, some sort of parallel reality that exists alongside our own, that veers off its track now and then to intersect with the path we’re pursuing: call it the afterlife, the past life, the unconscious or the imagined; whatever it is, once it mingles with what we recognize as our actual life, it becomes the real life of Valentine’s poems. And whatever distance we hope to keep from it is collapsed; we are forced to feel this real life we’d rather not live, where no narrative can contain the sudden, concrete presence of those we’ve lost, of how we’ve dreamed them, of what the past becomes when broken to pieces by memory. Here is “The Church” in its entirety:

“Thank you for the food,” we said,  
it was mashed potatoes, gravy, this  
was the place the regular people came,  
to go through the regular  
funnel. Leaving  
I saw———-and his red  
candle of “find it.” My life.

(The Cradle of the Real Life)

As in so many of Valentine’s poems, we begin in medias res, are introduced to a physical place and situation, are confronted with tenor-less metaphors (the funnel) and eventually find ourselves at some sort of linguistic and/or situational point of disorientation. Valentine allows both syntax and narrative to break down. Time and again there is a feeling of incompleteness, as if where the poem might be going and what it could be saying are truncated in favor of a more immediate, if inchoate, recognition. I’m
reminded, finally, of prayer, how such speech, if we can call it that, seems so unnecessary, since we are inevitably trying to communicate with something that knows our minds, that has no need for our words. And yet we struggle to catch up with what we intend to say, even if the prayer ends up only partly complete, the rest issued like a bat’s quiet echo toward an invisible target lost in the universe. We actually don’t need to say anything, yet the utterance is an act of ritual and faith, and what is left out is not completely knowable, even if somehow it is intended. Jean Valentine’s poems are products of enormous will and intention, even as they are models of acceptance and trust. All good poets know that the poem is smarter than they are; they know when to stop explaining things to themselves. The great ones trust their readers enough to let them in on their silences, to stand around with them not knowing.

So what is it? What is it that is so compelling about Jean Valentine’s increasingly compressed poetry? The longest poem in *The Cradle of the Real Life*, her most recent collection, runs twenty-one lines; most are much shorter. And why do these poems feel so much like remnants, pieces that seem to contain and represent enormous truths, none of which are easily available through traditional methods of explication? Part of the answer is implied in Swensen’s explanation of the ubiquitous fragment: we read Valentine’s poems because we recognize their authority without feeling any need to explain it; we’ve grown up with incompleteness, with juxtaposition, with poetry from countries and cultures that don’t necessarily privilege reason and rationality, countries without a Puritan tradition, with a love of domestic magic, countries that not only never forget the dead but live alongside them on a daily basis.

But I suspect it’s more than a newfound negative capability in the audience for poetry that’s created such interest and love for Valentine’s work. Simply put, her poems are haunted from within. She is one of those rare artists who takes the world personally,
then somehow finds a way to reshape it into the universal. Her poems speak for those who can’t, and not simply the dead who are so often her subjects. Jean Valentine’s confrontations with silence address the almost unbearable silences most of us can’t talk our way free of; they leash themselves to the black dog of depression, grip the empty glass of alcoholism, pray to the lost god of forgiveness, and stand with the inconsolable and innumerable ghosts. And they do so without the tedium of explanation and confession. They accept so much that they exist in pieces that don’t need the larger wholes. And we accept the pieces like broken hosts, spiritual synecdoches, remnants: more than enough.