The Host

Back in the 1970's, when I still believed in ghosts, I never would have put it past Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman to knock on my door

One humid morning early before I'd gotten dressed,
But putting my dream journal down on the table
And descending the grade of the tilted hall,
I would have opened with a two-handed yank
That swollen apartment door, and without many questions
Or sycophantic gesticulations, I would have asked them please to come on in
On their detour through town from Amherst to Brooklyn,
Would have brought them cups of tea or fresh hot coffee,
And would have thrown fat pillows down on the living room floor,
Ready to hear, just for posterity, or just because I'd never had
Real live ghosts speak to me before, Emily's crisp digressions
On lilac, mint, and daisy growing outside the door
And Walt's exalted impressions
Of the Puerto Ricans, Greeks, and African-Americans
Crossing against the light with Italians at the corner,
In a charcoal smock hanging from her shoulders as if from a clothesline
Emily all reverie for slant in rhyme and sun-ray, Walt all praise
For wave in tide and cadence, the cuffs of his overalls tucked in his work boots,
The two of them together, unlikely
Complements of the territory, holding forth with an eccentric authority
For me in my red night-shirt like a nineteenth century dreamer
Suppressing the temptation to interject with quips, with clichés,
With quotes from their poetry, rubbing my eyes occasionally
To see if it was true that these were the poets I thought they were,
When I still believed in ghosts, back in the 1970’s.

Sample 2

The 47 Bus

Yesterday at dawn, when the 47 bus went by the house,
I touched the cold glass of my picture window in pity
And put myself in the shoes of the people on board
Streaking past to work, fresh from beds and baths, in the laundry rooms,
The laboratories, and the early-morning emergency wards
Of hospitals spilled like pills across the ailing city.

I couldn’t experience through the motion-mural window
The mongrel world that I wouldn’t be a part of
Till eight or nine o’clock. I couldn’t hear the funky song
That the tall black technician in whites bounced up and down to
With his earphones on, unravel the thick and puerile plot
Of the popular purple novel that the white nurse in pink
Was reading, or scan the scene of the orderly’s fantasy
As the bus drifted through the orange delta shrimp-boat sunrise
Of his wartorn native village, back in Vietnam.

I wanted to steady their clean hands for the sutures they’d prepare
For surgeons all morning—to give them the strength they’d need
To wheel carts of medicines and sheets through the sanitized halls
And the pencil and mental sharpness required to figure
The natal and fatal results of blood tests and biopsies
They’d file in patient folders in drawers against the wall.

Looking with a chill through my own remote reflection
At the neighbors’ homely house, its drab brown drapes drawn
Against the bright day, I touched my fingertips to the glass
And wished that all traces of those ephemeral faces
Had not been washed from the surface so fast; that, when the bus passed,
Standing room only, I had had the opportunity
To put a few broad strokes of a paint brush on the cold glass,
Rendering indelible relevance to the bright yellow trim
On the bus’s white fenders, and to the abundant life within.

Sample 3
The Hexagram

Across the street from the city jail where junior felons meet
On their way to the state prison, I stopped last night to explicate
Half a dozen ideograms written in a hurried hand
With yarrow stalks, I figured, or a finger protected from the cold by a glove,
In a bank of fresh snow plowed to the end of a parking lot,
Ephemeral as a message scratched beside the ocean in sand.
For a minute I imagined, as I stood on the curb committing them
To memory for a poem, that the characters pertained
To the falsely tried case or the mistreated ill condition
Of someone in that house of correction the state had ordered built
To resemble a condominium. But then I decided on a cry of love
For some delinquent immigrant Asian who thought he’d gone to hell with guilt.

The teenager I pictured, skinny in jeans at the window of his barred cell,
Was peering through binoculars given him by his girlfriend
At a simple sentence in the snow which read, “I love you like a poison
Flower I shouldn’t pick.” I saw him shatter her image
By shaking his fragile head and turning on his television
On a chair at the foot of his bed—as if to escape to the global village.

Next I thought the characters said, unmelted since the afternoon,
“Your father and I are waiting in the car on that green bridge
You see beyond your window ledge. If not today we will meet you tomorrow
At noon when you’ve escaped. We’ll put you on a plane
And never see you again. You couldn’t have done what they say you’ve done,
Our only son, and it hurts to see you suffer such injustices in pain.”

From top to bottom, and bottom to top, by light of snow and streetlight
I scanned the cryptic figures, the triangles, cups, slashes, caps,
And crissed and crossed dashes, for something vaguely resembling
A Valentine heart skewered by an arrow, a peace sign likened
To the footprint of a chicken, or a hexagram representing, perhaps,
Six consecutive throws of the I Ching sticks for a newly doomed American.