
On the Subway

The young man and I face each other.
His feet are huge, in black sneakers
laced with white in a complex pattern like a
set of intentional scars. We are stuck on
opposite sides of the car, a couple of
molecules stuck in a rod of energy
rapidly moving through darkness. He has
or my white eye imagines he has
the casual cold look of a mugger,
alert under lowered eyelids. He is wearing
red, like the inside of the body
exposed. I am wearing old fur, the
whole skin of an animal taken
and used. I look at his unknown face,
he looks at my grandmother's coat, and I don't
know if I am in his power –
he could take my coat so easily, my
briefcase, my life –
or if he is in my power, the way I am
living off his life, eating the steak
he may not be eating, as if I am taking
the food from his mouth. And he is black
and I am white, and without meaning or
trying to I must profit from our history,
the way he absorbs the murderous beams of the
nation's heart, as black cotton
absorbs the heat of the sun and holds it. There is
no way to know how easy this
white skin makes my life, this

life he could break so easily, the way I
think his own back is being broken, the
rod of his soul that at birth was dark and
fluid, rich as the heart of a seedling
ready to thrust up into any available light.

Sharon Olds is the author of eight volumes of poetry, most recently Strike Sparks. A recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award, she is a Professor of Creative Writing in New York University's Graduate Program. She read as part of Poetry Night at GVSU in October 2006. This poem appears in her collection Gold Cell, and is reprinted here by permission of the author.