

An abstract painting with a dense, textured surface. The colors are primarily deep blue, magenta, and ochre, with splatters and streaks of red, yellow, and white. The brushwork is visible, creating a sense of movement and depth.

ONE BODY

*Poems*



MARGARET GIBSON



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MARGARET GIBSON

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS



BATON ROUGE



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*This book is for Isabelle, Rachel, and Anneka.*







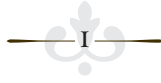
*What is it when the wind is blowing  
and the trees are bare?  
The golden wind, revealed.*







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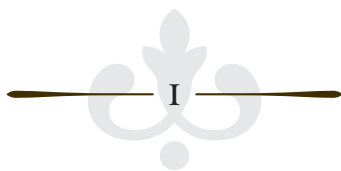
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## WASHING THE PITCHER

The long day after she died,  
before the unmerciful  
questions returned,  
I found on a low shelf  
tucked into the dark  
the small Delft pitcher,  
around it and inside it  
sleek black flecks  
not unlike coarsely milled  
black pepper, the tell-tale  
evidence of mice.  
On every vase or pitcher  
in that cupboard, on every plate  
a thick blur of dust.  
I might have washed  
all, or any one of them,  
but it was this one, blue  
and white, I wanted  
and with a certainty that felt  
unreasonable and right.  
And so I stood at the sink  
where each evening she'd stood  
washing the supper potatoes  
rinsing lettuce or fruit  
ignoring her tiredness,  
making her lists, perhaps  
repeating a prayer, her gaze  
on the rain gauge outside  
in the grass or on the garden's  
broken gate  
festooned with late summer  
sweet peas, pink and white.  
Rinsed to a shine, the pitcher,  
set down on the window sill,  
brimmed with light—



so that when I turned back  
to the room, it was not  
to the chaos of sorting and boxing,  
setting to rest her things,  
each one a mute testament  
to a life that once  
had silence and value and voice.  
No. When I turned, I was  
like a woman in a painting  
by Vermeer, my cap starched  
white, the copper plates  
polished, sunlight spilling  
from the open casement  
into the room, into the next room,  
and the next. When I turned,  
the table was set for breakfast,  
east light on the round oak table,  
light on the aluminum toaster,  
on the glasses of juice. There were  
cloth napkins in their wooden rings,  
blue mats, yellow plates and cups,  
a single jonquil in the bud vase  
on the lazy Susan, and a hand—  
Jean's hand—reaching  
to turn nearer  
the small blue and white pitcher,  
rinsed and revealed, just as it is  
in the moment full of light.



## THE WAITING

Back-lit by the river light that filled her window  
    in the nursing wing,  
        she'd balance on  
her only leg: then  
a sudden pivot

as we'd help her slowly over into her afternoon  
    chair. When the nurses  
        soaked and changed the bandages  
on her foot, flesh  
lifted away,

her toes gone black. And to deflect  
    what I felt  
        into what I could  
bear to think, I'd think  
of the great egret

at the margin of our pond, how it lifts  
    and holds close to its body  
        one black stilt,  
keeping its delicate  
balance,

steadily looking into its own  
    reflection: an impersonal  
        hunger in its belly,  
fierce precision  
in its eye—

it doesn't think *I'm alone*. It doesn't  
    think *I'm alone*  
        *in a body that can't*  
*love me.*



MEANING GOD, SHE SAID *LIGHT*

In just light, David limbed the white pines  
that threatened her house.  
In just light, I weeded her garden  
watching one by one  
the buds of the Stargazer

swell and its central stalk stoop over the garden's  
stone wall, then bloom:  
the weight of pain married to  
the odor of the implicit  
body: body

that longs to be body *and* light: body that belongs  
to river light and ruin.  
Sweet ruin, tell me  
what shall we pray for?  
So that with suppleness of will we may  
bend to this lavish scattering.



## A LEAF OF BASIL

I never understood the words  
*Take, eat . . .* until  
Joan brought to the hospital  
a sprig of basil, and Jean,  
who hadn't eaten  
more than a daily mouthful,  
keeping her eyes closed,  
put her hand on Joan's  
and drew the basil close.  
Breathed it in, smiled,  
paused—then, guiding the basil  
into her mouth, ate.  
Ate all of Greece,  
Corfu especially, and Crete.  
Ate goat cheese and a crust  
of bread, the dust  
of ruins and wild thyme.  
Kissed her dead husband's  
living mouth, wrapped  
around her body  
a wide shawl  
from Oaxaca's market.  
Wrote in her journal.  
Folded clothing  
for those made homeless  
by war, said  
something in Italian,  
in Spanish, in German.  
Said *light*. Remembered  
merriment and evening wine.  
Uncorked new bottles  
she'd made from dandelions  
gathered in fields  
thick with sun. Walked  
outside at night to watch



the slow, sudden comet  
arc between the cedars.  
Made her way to the garden  
to harvest beans.  
Sat quietly with friends.  
Set the table, mended socks,  
tended whatever needed  
tending—for of such  
is the kingdom of heaven.  
And wasn't it heaven  
and earth entire  
she swallowed? One leaf.  
Absolute and momentary.  
Leaf of final emptiness  
and harvest,  
leaf of open windows  
and self-watchful passion.  
Leaf of Antares, Arcturus,  
lamplight and fountain.  
One leaf, she took.  
One leaf, she breathed.  
One leaf, she *was* . . .



WHAT CANNOT BE KISSED AWAY

*What am I going to do now?* she wrote  
in her journal.

Counting her losses, she confessed  
just once

she was angry with God.

*Who else?* she said.

To understand her going blind, I close my eyes.

To sense what it would be like  
both legs gone

I tuck my own legs under me  
and sit  
facing the dark.

It's the best I can do.

Trying to imagine with my body  
what was come here to do

having finished.



## LAST WORDS

I wanted her words to make sense.

I wanted to think her suffering  
made each word count.

On Sunday, she asked to dictate a letter.

*To David Cornfield:*

*Dear David,*

*How much is seven cornfields?*

*At how much? And how much*

*per cornfield? I am very strict.*

She was propped up by pillows,  
as short in the bed as a child,  
each remaining thigh  
swaddled, plump as a loaf.

“No, no pain,” she lied.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know.”

“Someone must come.”



## COMFORT

I wade into the pond and reach down  
for the roots of the pond lilies,  
roots that reef and tangle into the mud.  
Tugging. Falling back from the force  
of their letting go. Reaching into  
the snarled and braided tenements,  
bumped now and again by the fish  
that feed on these moorings.

Putting my face under, coiling the long  
whips of stems with their flat pads and buds,  
heaving them to the shore.  
Still angry that she must suffer so.  
Wishing the root of her pain weren't  
so hidden, so human.  
Wishing God were not inside me.

A green frog stretches out on a lily pad,  
watchful. I want to assure it  
I won't pull up all the lilies in my fury.  
The root of *comfort*, and the motive,  
I remind myself, is strength, not ease.  
*Out of the depths I cry to Thee,*  
O God . . . what's the rest of it?

I tug up from the murk and silt  
a raft of root, long stems, a few blossoms  
floating after, like the wake of an ecstasy  
or a flush of pain, my hands now  
stained purple by the lilies, black by the mud.  
The same hands that fumbled through  
her Psalter and couldn't find the one  
she wanted, couldn't find my way.



*Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit?  
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell  
in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there . . .*

I read her that instead.



P S A L M

As I read the psalm, she lifted from the bed  
both her arms: briefly, not far:  
then let them fall  
alongside her, as if to say  
*I have taken the blow, and it is good.*

Shall I keep reading? I asked. She nodded.  
The vein in her neck beat fast,

her eyes stayed shut. She never said  
my name, nor did it matter  
who I was: *that* was  
her gift, her teaching.  
She was laying herself aside—

so I read until the sound of my voice became  
her breathing, her breathing

the wind that lulls and falls off, sundering  
sentence and skein, unraveling  
back to the Source  
O resourceful Maker,  
innermost: beyond our names.



DARK NIGHT I

Her breathing changed—

as when a hearth fire  
flickers, nearly out

and one takes a bellows  
and pumps it,

a rapid chuffing.

Then a pause,  
to see if the fire takes.

All night her breathing  
was like this.

Perhaps the spent body's way  
of asking itself,

*Are you sure? Are you sure?*



## DARK NIGHT II

Presence  
cannot be verified

by breath alone.

Nor can it be inhaled  
like the smell of the fresh peach

I brought to tempt her back into her life.

Within reach

all night it ripened.



### DARK NIGHT III

When her eyes fluttered open  
it was night. When they closed again, night.

Night when her gaze met mine, her eyes fully open.

Dark night and open when I cried out  
and put my head on her shoulder. Night

when I closed her eyes and continued to sit with her.  
Dark night, dark night.

In which everything, and nothing, is—whether I can see it  
or not.



## IRIS

Where are you now, old soul?

I ask, just here by your door stone  
transplanting iris,  
the blue flags  
whose corms twist and knot into mats  
so thick, I must

change into the one who strove with the nameless  
angel at Peniel,  
strove and prevailed.  
Without knowing it, face to face  
with God.

But I'm not made for this work, I think.  
Even your husband  
turned the air blue  
with his efforts to wrest these iris  
out of the earth.

Stones rest solidly in themselves.  
These iris, these rainbows  
with roots, must have  
made a pact with stones, a covenant.  
*Steadfast, hold fast.*

On your last day, I swallowed hard and said  
you were loved—by so many  
loved. But if  
your spirit needs to go, I said,  
*let it go.*

Now I can't believe you're not here.  
Feel me tugging, tugging—  
as if these iris,



this house, autumn sun, my own  
sweat might just give

back, hard-won and humble, your presence.  
In the smell of the dirt,  
in the low call of the owl,  
you: you knelt here, tugged iris,  
turned your head

to glimpse sun-flash and wing-shadow  
sweeping over the grass,  
with no need to say,  
*I will not let you go until you bless me—*  
already blessed.



## ASHES

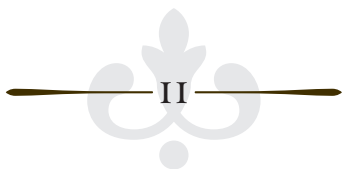
It rained. Further inland  
the road was a black mirror that held  
in a wet shimmer gold maples  
and the boughs of evergreens  
bent with early snow. Between  
the White Mountains and the distant  
ridges of the Green, the valley lifted,  
floating in the mists. *All the way  
to heaven is heaven*, I thought,  
as if we carried your ashes  
into a Chinese painting. As if  
Charles Chu had painted the day  
and hung it in panels, the world  
of earth and sky your living room.

In the graveyard at North Sebago,  
near the lake, we dug you in,  
lifting a flap of sod.  
*Work to simplify the heart*, you  
advised. We dug, then took  
the two white boxes, your ashes  
and his, and put them side by side.  
Then stood silent. How small  
they were, the boxes,  
rimmed by a frame of wet earth  
that showed the strict, raw marks  
of the shovel. The rain fell  
steadily, the rim contracted,  
as if it were the iris of an eye  
or a telescope. All I could see  
were those two white forms,  
which widened  
to include the whole  
mind and body of the world.



So that, after we rolled the sod  
back over and sealed it,  
I knew there were, beneath my feet,  
mountains and a lake, clouds,  
and the moon clear and still  
behind the mist and daylight,  
through which two figures emerged,  
an old hoe tilted at rest on his shoulder,  
in her hand a basket—light green  
to heighten the effect of the mountains,  
the weave of the basket  
rendered in strokes like the veins  
of a lotus leaf, like ax cuts, raveled rope.











## NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPH

Beneath a band of broken cloud-light, in silhouette against the morning sky  
a line of women climbs the stone embankment,

a rising line of women, single file, each with a basket balanced on her head—  
*migrant women*, the caption says,

*carrying stones in a quarry in India.*

They are Bangladeshi—but to my distanced eye they could be figures in a frieze  
on a temple architrave,

or a repeating detail in black slip on a potsherd fired before the fifth century,

women with bowls or vessels on their heads, women with wide, shallow baskets—  
their necks taut and strong, their heads at a tilt

through the centuries carrying oil, carrying wine, carrying the harvest grains  
a civilization depends on.

But these are women in a stone quarry, and the morning mist, I realize,

isn't mist at all, but a dust that soils their saris, burns their eyes, silts  
into their ears—they eat dust with each breath

as they climb the rise to spill an offering of stones into the machine at the crest,  
then turn back on the sloped path

to the stone heap, whose rim-line resembles Mount Meru, to refill their baskets.  
And now I see how their coming and going

makes a wheel: a wheel of life and death: a mandala that would interest  
you, Gautam Mukerjee,

wry economist and lover of justice, who once as a child on pilgrimage  
in the mountains above the Ganges



looked steeply up and saw against the brilliant sky a white bird, its wings  
outspread as it spiraled into a blaze of light—*a sign*, you said, sent  
by the holy man toward whom your journey tended,  
*the silent voice of the gods made visible*—as all such images are: at the least  
a caution: a leading: a prayer:

*God, make me see.*



## THE GAZE

Why, in the middle of the night, in the sleepless interval it takes  
the horned moon to pass the peak of the south cedar, sliding west,  
do I remember, years ago, that young man who from his bike downhill

reached out and touched one of my breasts as he sped by?  
I was walking, en route to the college, mulling over the stanzaic pattern  
of Keats's *Ode to a Grecian Urn* when I saw him.

He had already sped by me once, on the tarmac, dressed like  
a yellow-jacket in a helmet—so why was he here again, coming straight  
toward me, so soon, this time on the sidewalk I walked on?

There were no cars on the road that passed over the turnpike.  
The ground to my left fell steeply away beyond the guard rail  
into an alcove of wasteland. Ironweed, broken bottles, wire.

No way to avoid him, I held his gaze. I let him know I saw him, too—  
although now I recall how sexless was the squeeze  
he gave my breast. Not tentative—no, no. It was deliberate,

if also dispassionate. He might have been trying a goat's teat  
before milking it. Puckish, too. *I could do more, but I won't*,  
said his hand, his mouth ruled in a straight line of shuttiness.

All the way downhill, from the moment I understood he was  
coming for me, his eyes—blue, cold, hard as he was  
on the saddle seat of his chrome and steel speed bike—

held mine, screwdriver to screw. I looked into the gaze of  
a loathing so transparent I understood that the dark spirits of rape,  
ethnic cleansing, interrogation, and self-hatred

were distilled there in a mockery of the lover's gaze—  
so that after he poked me, squeezed, and let me live  
I thought in numb denial, *So I have been bruised by a god*.



A rueful, even a silly, thought. Better that, than to have turned the moment from its understated terror, taking his gaze inward, ashamed that I wore my summer blouse too tight.



IN JANUARY, THE MORNING AFTER THE STATE  
OF THE UNION ADDRESS, I GO OUTSIDE TO STAND  
IN SNOWFALL AND COLD AIR

*just to breathe*, I tell myself  
as if I

or anyone  
might start over, the public slate  
wiped clean. No greed, no war,  
no fear of war declared by others  
in my name. The shame of it.

Then, loud from leafless thickets  
now plumed white with camouflage  
lifts the song of a winter wren,  
a swirl of notes that enters the scant  
descending descant of the snow—  
just what is: no more.

*Do they think*

*we are fools?* I mutter into  
my scarf as I kick a stone  
I let stand for the war they have  
so carefully provoked—that is,  
*the wars.*

How seldom  
we see ourselves as we are,  
naked as birth-cry.  
It's hard to see, to know,  
to speak clearly  
breathing in the invisible ash  
that is always here. We call it  
*confetti, smoke screen, snow—*  
as the ash blows in from  
Iraq, from Chile and Nam Phen,  
from My Lai, Alamogordo,  
Washington, and Watts.



Nothing's now what it seems—  
this snow and wind the mindless  
sweep of consent to war;  
the song of the winter wren the cry  
of a child in Baghdad. Unless  
in a change of heart and mind  
somehow we change  
the stone that stands for war  
to a single, life-giving syllable—No.



## FUEL

*I am*, said the voice in the oil spill of rainbow radiance,  
*the angel of El, from the deserts and gulfs of El.*

I looked for a face, flesh and blood I might hold  
accountable, a name. It saw right through me. *Uriel*,

*Eliel, Emmanuel, Fuel*, said the angel. *Fuel?* I replied,  
and a human form stood before me, a merchant

who turned to measuring my life as if I were cloth,  
judging length and price by the distance between his elbow

and the tip of his middle finger. The arm wore camouflage  
the shade of sand and bone. *You do what suits me*,

Fuel smiled. He tossed the dead man's arm aside. *Grenade*,  
he said. Arched his eyebrows, shrugged.



## MOMENT

Just now, as I'm listening to the rain plink off the rim of the down-spout,  
she is walking toward the embassy,

the explosives hidden beneath her clothing, swaddled against her belly,  
warmed by her heat.

As I riffle through pages and pages of poems in Machado's *Times Alone*  
in search of the golden wind

that quickens words like *jasmine, lemon*, in Tuzla a young girl watches  
a man stumble to his knees

at the edge of a field, his hands tied behind him, and already she hears  
the clink of the shovel

that will uncover his bones, and those of the others, two winters and one  
harvest hence.

Listening and muttering, riffling and watching, I look up, startled to hear  
soaking into the stones at the edge

of the woods, *Cocoon! Cocoon!* the call of a dove, so murmurous and clear  
I could follow it gladly

into silence and green shade. *Not now*, I tell myself. *Not now*. Ask first  
what it is such silence mystifies.

Who it implicates, who protects. What it refuses, what construes.



## RESPECT

### *I*

How strange they were, how fearsome, with their lidless  
yellow eyes, the fierce and accurate  
bobbing of their necks, the flounce of burnished tail feathers,  
the way each yellow foot  
lifted itself, flexed its nubbly toes, spread them out and set  
them down in slow motion  
while the fury of their bobbing necks kept up a rapt staccato  
near my bare toes.  
In the midst of them stood Edwin, no shirt, baggy overalls,  
holding a hen by  
the ankle part, her feet sticking out the back of a hand big as  
a baseball mitt.  
Sun flashed off the head of the hatchet that hung in the rung  
of his overalls. With his back  
turned, he was whistling! Whistling, he didn't have to see us,  
Betsy and me—why should he  
have to deal with Miss Doyle's city girls? The chicken,  
now a flapping squawk of feathers,  
grew quiet, stilled perhaps by Edwin's gait, a lumbering  
that rolled over the earth  
and knew it round, a stolid rocking that took him over  
to the wide stump of wood.  
I let myself be drawn there, coming near with my body,  
moving away in my mind.  
In a motion so swift it was seamless, like light, down came  
naked arm, steel edge,  
and the weight of Edwin's determination to give Aunt T  
what she'd asked for,  
Sunday dinner. All this met in the hen's neck, which I knew  
from sucking one in Brunswick stew  
was an interlocked lace of bones. Soundlessly, over  
into the wood dust



went the hen's head, the eye yellow with a jet black center,  
the beak hard and bright.  
I held my breath, my sister let out an explosion of giggles,  
pointing—for there in the dust,  
released from Edwin's grasp, the chicken's body, headless,  
ran in swooping arcs about the wood yard,  
looking for its head. "Do another one!" my sister demanded,  
delighted with the dancing dead hen.  
"Miss T want two more hens for company Sunday," Edwin said.  
He wouldn't let us think  
he'd kill another one because two white girls from the city,  
who didn't know what they were  
looking at, the difference between life and death, had asked him.

## II

Marie, my mother used to say, had white blood—that's why her skin  
was coffee with milk.  
Edwin's, she said, was coffee without sugar or milk, and that's why  
he wanted nothing to do with  
any of us, why he stayed outside when Marie plucked the hens  
in a bucket of water  
hot as her hands could stand. I thought the palms of her hands  
were pink because  
they'd faded in the scald of hot water. Thought again—no, were  
that so, her hands would be entirely pink.  
Edwin's hands were light and dark, also the soles of his feet.  
Some things made no sense, and one of them  
was color. Head down, hunched over, Marie held the bucket  
steady between her knees.  
In hot water the red feathers turned dark brown, the yellow feet  
turned yellower.  
Once they were cooked, Marie would take them and suck them—  
she said they were sweet.  
I never asked Marie for a suck. Nor did she offer it. "The feet  
is mine," she said,



and she could have them, sticking up like broken witches' umbrellas,  
evil angles with curved  
spurs. Sweat kerneled on Marie's forehead, slid down her neck  
into her dress where it darkened  
the seams around her shoulders. She grunted softly as she yanked,  
then looked up.  
"Law, child, you gonna faint? Run along now, run along."

### III

And I did, I ran. It would take years before I'd see face to face  
on a city sidewalk  
during the march in Memphis a black man with a sign hung round  
his neck, words  
so simple and dignified and true, they stunned me. *I am a man.*  
Years more  
before that city black man blurred, and I saw Edwin there  
and wondered hard  
who he had been, and went back to Amelia, driving the curved  
country roads  
until I recognized the red dirt lane that led to their small cabin  
with the well out back.  
Marie lived there, but I'd come too late—Edwin, she said,  
had gone home to God;  
her son Junior, home from a war with one arm and an empty  
sleeve pinned to his shirt,  
lived up north near Bridgeport. She'd worked for the Harvies,  
one family or another of them,  
all her life, she laughed, voice high and shrill, eyes bright.  
"Your sister," she asked, "she still fat?"  
I wasn't ready to talk about my sister, still stung by Marie's reply  
when I said I'd come  
*in my mother's place.* "No'm," she'd cried. "Ain't nobody takes  
Miss Doyle's place, nobody."  
My face turned red as a beet in her garden—because hadn't I  
wanted to be the ambassador of better things?



Hadn't I wanted to supplant my mother, who'd still talk to me  
like this: "I've changed, you know.  
I went to Willemina's funeral, afterwards right to her house.  
It was as clean as a white person's!"

#### IV

What Marie and I might have been to each other, had I come  
without wanting from her  
something I couldn't yet give myself, I'll never know.  
I couldn't name it, then.  
I sat on the sofa and showed her pictures of my family. I asked  
questions until she laughed,  
"You one of them radicals?" She wiped her eyes, told me how  
back then,  
when my mother first came to board with Miss T and teach  
in the two-room schoolhouse,  
no one had money, not even the white folks. "I'd iron  
for the Garlands,  
cook at the wood stove for Miss T, chop wood with Edwin  
at the sawmill.  
It was *that way*." Her voice settled on the words, and she  
didn't say anything for a while.  
Then, as a quickening wind turns leaves on their backsides  
before a storm, she started up again—  
Miss Mason, now there was a piece of work, didn't I remember  
Miss Mason? Tiny woman,  
ate like a bird, pillar of the church? fine family? Well.  
On a day hot as fire, she said,  
there on her big porch was Miss Mason, calling *Oh Marie,*  
*you there, Marie!*  
"I stopped, put my milk pail in the shade. Mrs. Garland  
had give me some fresh  
milk I had to get home, and here's Miss Mason, daughter  
of a judge, asking me



to clean fireplaces.” As she must have done then, she  
 paused. Asked how much  
 Miss Mason would give her. “*Fifty cents*,” she replied,  
 her voice like velvet.  
 “When I finished, all four fireplaces clean as spit,  
 she come over to me,  
 pretty as you please, and cool—she’d been on the porch  
 in a good breeze—says,  
*Mercy me, Marie, look here.* Her hand held out two coins.  
*I looked in my purse, sure I had*  
*two quarters, and here I find one quarter and this dime.”*  
 It was the way  
 she said it. Said it so Marie would see she was smarter than  
 any colored could hope to be.  
 Miss Mason’s words in Marie’s mouth—I could  
 taste them.  
 And Marie? She had milk to get home. She couldn’t say,  
 “It’s not enough, you gave  
 your word, could you pay me later?” One word, that’s all  
 it would take, one word, *uppity*,  
 and there she’d be, down on her luck, down on her knees  
 clean ’cross the county.  
 “We were both polite,” Marie said. “Polite, and  
 slicker than the courthouse floor.”  
 She paused. “Think about it. Both of us,  
 so polite.”

## V

As a child, I thought I knew Marie. I knew her close smell,  
 a cross between starch and lavender.  
 She let me swat flies when they got too bad in the kitchen,  
 she let me pat the biscuits  
 onto the tin pans. She held me in her arms one afternoon  
 when I came running in



so angry with my sister I could only blurt out, "I hate her,  
I hate her."

I can't remember now what my sister did to hurt me.

I was keeping an unspoken  
list of her sins, her stupidities—they were my secrets.

They were evidence  
I could use to prove we were different. I could  
turn my back and walk away  
justified, unharmed, unafraid. It didn't matter  
we were sisters—we were  
different, I told Marie. We had nothing in common,  
I hated her.

What Marie murmured to me, I took as comfort.

*Oh, Honey*, she said  
back then in the summer kitchen's heat. *Oh, Honey*.



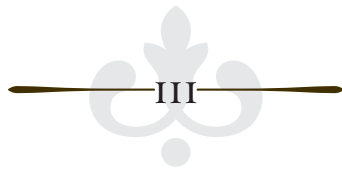
## ONE BODY

I am born in a field  
of cornflowers and ripe wheat  
wind in the black gum trees  
late afternoon before the storm  
and the men are cutting the field  
working the mower in circles  
coming in and in  
toward the center of the field  
where I crouch down  
with the rabbits, with the quail  
driven into this space by the clackety mower  
because I want to see  
how the body goes still  
how the mind, how the lens of the eye  
magnifies to an emptiness  
so deep, so flared wide  
there is everywhere field and the Source  
of field, and only  
a quiver of the nose  
or the flick of a top-knot feather, a ripple  
so faint I may have imagined it, says  
*yes, says no*  
to the nearing rustle in the last stand of wheat—  
and now it's quiet, too quiet  
a soft trample  
a click, the cocking sound, a swish  
as the men steal in to take  
what they want  
they are clever, they are hungry  
and because this one body is  
my birthplace  
my birthright, my only homeplace  
my nest and burrow and bower  
I understand  
my mother is wheat, my father is wind



and I rise in a tall gust  
of rage and compassion  
I rise up from the mown and edible  
debris of the world  
wrapped in a bright  
net of pollen and stars, my thighs  
twin towers of lightning  
and my voice  
I am a storm of voices, snipe and wolf  
snow goose, dolphin, quail, and lark—  
*Stop this. Stop it now*  
I say to the men, who stalk closer  
keen on the kill, late light  
on the steel of their rifles  
and they are my brothers—they are my brothers  
and I love them, too  
*Look into my eyes*  
I tell them. *See for yourself the one shining field*  
*Look into my eyes*  
*before you shoot*











## LILIES OF THE VALLEY

Comes the nor'easter, with its churn of cold Atlantic air, the rough spit of it flung  
    against clapboard and cedar shingles, a baffling whine at the windows,  
a buffeting in the maples that bend and bow over the pond rucked white by downpour,  
    and look, tiny wells in the fine mesh of the screen door, which shudders,  
and none of it, none of it dims the insistent steadiness of scent in those  
    slender bell flowers, inconspicuous at best, obscured  
in the thrash of rain, how they tremble, each one beneath an alcove of green leaf  
    so like the mandorla behind a Bodhisattva—and no bells  
jangled, neither raw soliloquy nor rant nor solicitous inquiry (our forms of grief),  
    theirs only a steady dumbstruck essence, sweet, Lord, so sweet  
it passes understanding year by year as they return unabated, generous (like my father,  
    who planted them), rising each season from their underworld of mud  
and stone and root, so fluent their beatitude I nearly understand how the meek  
    can inherit the earth.



## ELEGY FOR MY FATHER

### *Gifts*

The Monday before he died,  
he put on the new glasses  
I'd sent at his request  
and slipped onto his wrist  
the new watch with the white hands  
and blue face. For the time being  
he was time being my father  
as the watch on his wrist  
counted out the four last days  
he'd have in his body on earth.  
When the pain blazed in his chest,  
I want to believe he saw  
only light as he melted into it.  
*You know where your father's  
life is now?* my friend asked  
and gave me without a pause  
these words, *It's in you.*



*Word over All, Beautiful as the Sky*

I'd asked to see him before he was  
made up and clothed in the suit  
I brought—labeled in his own  
hand, *best suit, red stripe*,  
a charcoal gray with an artery  
of red in the weave.  
And so I opened the door and found  
him in the formal room,  
before the folds of a pleated curtain,  
on a table, two white sheets  
softly folded back, so that just  
his collarbone, neck, and head  
met air. He was whiter than  
the white cloth, colder  
than my hands, which shook.  
I touched first his hair, clean  
and soft; both my hands  
held his cheeks. I smoothed  
his eyebrows, touched  
his hands, the hard  
bones of his knuckles severe,  
unrelenting. I kissed him.  
And whispered in his ear  
words I knew were for my benefit.  
If his spirit lingered in the room,  
if he saw me tend the husk  
he'd threshed from, he learned  
nothing new. He knew, thank God,  
I loved him. I don't know  
how long I stayed there.  
Somewhere the sky was clearing.  
Night sky and sun sky  
turning one into the other,  
the slow debris of stars, of dust  
and pollen, turning. And



I learned this. His body,  
that coffin of snow,  
was also cloud and rain light—  
I would have to let him go.



*Body of Light*

My friend Jane has seen spirits—beneficent, fierce—and painted them,  
storm-lit, eclipse-lit, dawn-lit  
breath by breath, each breath drawn up from the depths  
of an under-color unmistakably glowing,  
as mutable as sky.

The horizon, how it shifts, washed by light.

On white paper, ruled with blue horizontal lines  
and a single vertical to bound me,  
now I write *father*.

In water, in fire, in air I write it—remembering  
the particular, flushed, indigenous  
earth smell of his skin.



*Listening to Elgar's Sospiri*

It's in the bass notes, slow as a fading  
heartbeat. The resignation of it.  
The restitution. It's how  
quietly the music swells  
and spreads, unrolling as a wave  
momentarily certain on the shore,  
assuring me: *he was ready*.  
I had wanted to be with him—  
he chose what we could bear.  
Don't ask how I know. Perhaps  
I don't know.

But tonight  
when David asked if I wanted a fire,  
the spring night cold, and I said *yes*,  
I was thinking of my father's ardent  
spirit. I wanted that.  
And when the fire failed  
to catch and keep—too little  
kindling and the oak log  
thick—we were too weary  
to fuss with it. An hour passed.  
We read, had supper—  
then of its own accord the fire blazed.  
*Sospiri*, it flared and, for a moment,  
I saw the fire inside the fire.  
Call it what you will, the radiance  
in the room had presence—*his*.



## MY MOTHER'S GIRDLE

My mother isn't dead,  
but I'm disposing of her things, unpacking  
two dressers, a closet  
a pine chest  
weeding out old Christmas cards  
and doctor's appointments, saved napkins and the  
little containers of jam  
she's taken  
from restaurants, afraid  
she'll never have enough, never enough  
and wanting a "sweet touch"  
at the close of a bitter day.  
As she's grown older,  
she's fit herself into smaller and smaller rooms,  
moving from the only  
house I can remember  
from my childhood  
into retirement's doll house, then to a large room  
and assisted independence  
where she made her bed  
throne and parliament—  
now to a shared double in the nursing wing,  
for which I am saving  
one dresser, a night stand  
an armchair, family pictures  
a handkerchief angel, and the little stuffed lamb  
she puts under her pillow,  
away from those who  
come in the night  
to take things: her valuables, the predicates  
of her sentences, the names of those  
who roam too quietly  
about the many mansions  
of her Father's house. I unpack the starched  
linens she never used,



the blouses I sent her,  
never worn and folded in with  
pajamas I wore as a teenager, and a swimsuit.  
Three Bibles, the prayers  
she scribbled on the envelopes  
of unopened bills and advertisements.  
A tea towel I made in art class, fifth grade, with unevenly  
blue ink-block prints of a sailboat  
sailing off, sailing away.  
No love letters, only  
the aqua dress she wore to my wedding, and a fan from  
the church in Amelia  
where she married my father.  
Ten pairs of white gloves,  
a box of calling cards faded yellow, an old girdle—  
the sateen of its belly-guard frayed  
but still shining,  
the upper border of elastic  
bowed and rippled by the pressure of her upright flesh.  
I hold it up, smooth it out,  
then lock the door of the room  
and lift my skirt  
tugging it on, remembering how audibly she sighed  
herself out of her Sunday's best,  
the pent-up flesh inside the girdle  
gratefully released  
as she lowered the side zipper, bending over to unlatch  
her nylons from the little tabs,  
letting them fall to her ankles  
then off with the high heels,  
a tug to the girdle, down it went, hips to thighs  
unburdened then wholly free  
as the flesh that had been  
hidden away met the flesh that had  
gathered into rolls and bulged between the girdle  
and her heavy bra—  
it all came down,



melting down—as finally  
now come my tears for this woman who tried  
with her lists and commandments  
and prayers  
to make herself good enough,  
and the rest of us, shaping the lives that had  
sprung from the depths of her,  
fitting us into the fictions  
she told herself for comfort,  
passing off the frayed story of her life  
for life itself.  
Who she wasn't,  
who she was—  
do I know? I pull in my breath and my stomach,  
turning sideways to the mirror.  
Here is the belly  
that never had children,  
a belly flatly swaddled in innocent sateen, stubbornly  
empty with longing.  
Oh, but I have rebelled  
enough. Right or wrong, I can love  
her now—as only I can, as only I am—holding back just this,  
my childish fear  
of her unsatisfied  
heart, still so stubbornly holding on.



## YONDER

Summer nights, I still smell the honeysuckle at the edge of her voice  
when she called me to listen to the bobwhites

across the field, their call and response a way to measure the interval  
between dusk and white blaze as the moon,

our distaff and shadow-bearing source of profusion, rose. Wild roses  
she called *God's grace*.

*Ohh*, she says now, drawing out the vowel, making do. Her words,  
like petals, have slipped by hank or handful

loose, and fallen in a clump at the foot of the last nodding peony.  
How I loved to hear her say *Chula, Coverly*,

place names I might now graft to a new brood of roses, or chant,  
giving weight to the nameless name of God.

Tonight the night is solstice bright, the moon close to brimming.  
How long does *long ago* last?

Bred in the bone, this ache to hold her. This hunger to know  
the child she has irrevocably become,

drawn so far inside herself I can't touch the hem of her cotton nightdress  
as she rises out of her body

and rambles beyond the spreading fields of wheat and stars, back  
through the orchard of pear trees, across the wild meadow,

slowly, oh so slowly, going home.



## ASK ME NOW

### *I*

To raise her spirits  
someone has painted her toenails  
with a lacquer clear as  
the white of an egg but with flecks of glitter added in  
to flash like mica,  
like quartz in stone.  
I have come a long way,  
if the common measure of love  
is loss, to rub her legs and her callused feet  
with a lotion rich in lavender,  
remembering how our mother  
used to stand at the margin of our room, the door  
narrowed open,  
and sing into the dark where we lay unready for sleep,  
an arbor of phosphorescent stars  
pasted to the ceiling.  
I don't know if the body believes the words  
we offer it, or if it listens  
only to the motive below the motive, octaves down—  
but I still see her, about to withdraw,  
and the stroke of light  
that crossed the coverlet as her alto  
patience and intimate  
refrain lilted over us, like a hand stroking back  
damp hair from a feverish forehead.  
Side by side  
in our twin beds, alone in the dark,  
our small bodies  
already ripening to the sweet danger within us—  
to hear our mother sing to us  
at the verge of limitless  
night, the song offered up from the deep  
harbor of her body,



must have gathered us, continued and carried us at rest  
into the flushed, ready morning.  
Ask me now  
if I believe in resurrection, body and mind—  
I'd have to hum  
what little I remember of the song that carried us  
all through the night that was  
deeper than we could know.  
"I've named my left arm Lazarus," she confides,  
and I nod,  
letting my hands, wiser than I am, work the song  
measure by measure into the muscles  
of her left arm and leg.  
"I see you," she says, turning her body slowly  
toward the side of herself  
she neglects, finding me there. *I see you*—said  
without surprise or particular  
emphasis, as if I hadn't,  
all these years, forgetting to remember her,  
scorned and disregarded  
part of my own heart. When finally I say, "See you  
in the morning," she answers quickly,  
"I'll be right here."

## II

Alone in my own dark room,  
I lift my head from hands so wet  
with tears they smell like rain  
in a field of lavender. Afraid for her life, abandoned and to come,  
I flip open my journal  
and I see the words,  
*Do not fear. Only believe,*  
*and she shall be well.* Only believe.



Credo, it means give your heart, give it scorned and abandoned  
worthy and not worth much,  
give it finally, freely.

*What seems so far from you, I read,  
is most your own.*

I take the words into my body. Take them, sister,  
into yours. They are light.

Or let me rub them lightly  
on your skin, oil of lavender,  
oil of rosemary and rue.

Alone in the body's dark nights, in its gardens and hovels,  
in its rivers and mountains and many rooms,  
together we lie down.



COOKING SUPPER WHILE MY SISTER DIES

She takes her last meal of sugar water and oblivion,  
the needle keen as a knife, a double-edged bridge

she must cross into the Unsayable. *Wait*, I say, *wait*—  
but she will not, nor can I go with her, delay

in each grain of rice, exile in the onions I chop so fine  
I am word blind, my face wet with the rain

that was her grief, and mine, that we did not love  
each other long enough. Black olives, then zucchini

diced, swept into a pan from the wooden board,  
a heave offering to the wine-dark sea.

And I must . . . I can only . . . I am left with . . .  
this tomato, sun-ripened and taut, tinged green

at the pock where it let go of the vine. Into hinged  
wedges I cut it slowly. Slowly. Wanting

her to be like a flower that opens into a summer night  
of stars, breath by breath.

Wondering, *Is it here? Is it yet? Is it now?*











POETRY IS THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD, WATCHING

I

Unpacking books, shelving them  
in the library of this old house,  
I come across *The Duel*, a chapbook  
Louis Rubin made of poems I wrote  
before I left school. The book—  
barely worn, inscribed  
to the boy who would become  
my first husband—just to look at it  
makes me touch my face  
as if touch might summon back  
the girl who, like a distant  
relative, faintly  
resembles me now.  
I turn the pages, perusing  
a line here, a line there—  
stopped finally  
by a title so certain, so absolute,  
it takes away my breath.

*Poetry Is the Spirit of the Dead, Watching*

What on earth did I mean by that?  
Who was I reading? Coleridge? Yeats?  
The Eliot of *Ash Wednesday*?  
Listen. A *moss light*  
*moves the tops of trees,*  
*the hem of a garment walking*  
*in circles; moves patiently and still. . . .*  
Easter in the poem,  
it was April in western Virginia  
beneath Tinker Mountain  
where I wrote it, the slim trees  
puckering with leaves and early  
blossoms, shadblow, flowering judas.



Outside now, a slow rain curtains the house,  
sifts through the cedars, beads  
on the back of the doe  
that crosses the grass in the dark  
to eat the day lilies at the garden's  
edge. I understand her hunger.  
My husband's in bed in another room,  
unwell. The fire's made. In Old English  
*heorth* and *heorte*, hearth and heart,  
are close.

*Ker, ker—*

I imagine the crow's chill call.  
Let it center me. *Keramos*.  
Cremate. Potter's clay.

The roots of words send out their spirits.

*We are measured by our light,*  
said the hermetic and mild  
beloved master of this house,  
who raised it from collapse  
and ruin. He didn't get  
his wish to die here,  
where the gate to eternity (he felt)  
swung on its hinges  
open, shut, open—and is swinging  
still, he'd say, as the spirits pass by,  
watching.

Alone tonight,  
I'll sit with him, with all the spirits  
who made this house, hearth, heart.  
I would be *with* them.

*Withed.*



## II

In the central chimney's great fireplace  
the bread oven's set far back—  
the woman of the house would have  
singed her skirt fetching out the bread,  
stirring the kettle of hominy  
and winter root crops. In 1680,  
a farmer built this house  
and scabbled Connecticut's stones  
out of the earth for walls and a pentway,  
for the foundation of a carriage house  
said to have been made of bird's eye maple.  
He kept sheep, farmed what he could  
in earth studded with glacial rubble.  
The house was built by a *poor* farmer  
who set gunstock posts,  
rough-hewn beams, chestnut  
and oak boards for the walls and floors.  
The King's wood, seven  
of my hands across, meant for  
English ships, he cut and nailed  
into the wall behind the cellar door,  
unseen. The original family  
slept in a smoky loft, collected tolls  
from anyone who used the road through  
their fields to get to North Stonington,  
lived poor, died poor, left the cottage  
to descendants who, after a few  
generations, moved on.

When Hobart Mitchell found the house  
in 1950 poison ivy and trumpet vine  
furled out the gape in the slumped roof.  
It was a critter's den he bought,  
with a hundred acres, and for so little  
it makes me know what envy is.



Bought it, patched it, fixed it up  
between singing tours and  
college semesters, lived here with  
one wife who died before him,  
and with another, dear Jean,  
who died after him six months.  
Childless, he left us the house  
and the road, having put  
the wooded ridges, wetland,  
wolf trees, nurse logs, bobcat,  
wild turkey, and deer into a land trust.  
We have a few of his books—  
*We Would Not Kill*, which he wrote,  
also the chapbook of early love poems  
he kept in his desk drawer, and  
by Gerald Heard, *Prayers and Meditations*,  
which he studied and taught before  
First Day's Meeting for Worship.  
We have his garden tools,  
his manuscripts, and a photograph  
of the Himalayas steeply white  
above a village in Darjeeling. I wear  
his college ring, carnelian and gold.  
From Jean we have an earthen vase  
from Oaxaca, the blue cloth from  
Christmas dinners, the china she  
chipped when her hands grew clumsy  
with arthritis. Because I wanted  
to keep their spirits near me,  
I purchased from their small estate  
a winged thing, a silver maple seed  
that could be fastened by a long  
sharp pin.

In this house,  
once the designated poor house  
in the crossroads town of Preston,  
each morning they sat in the silence



of the indwelling Light.  
In this room, Hobart used his hands  
to heal whoever asked him. At night  
for a time they summoned spirits,  
moving the planchette across the board,  
waiting patiently. They listened to music  
before going off to bed and the wild  
comfort and wide grace  
of their bodies' passion. Outside,  
near the well, behind the buckled  
old white lilac, Jean  
heard a spirit in the wilderness,  
so lonely, crying out. She probably  
*held it in the light*—then took it in.



### III

How many years ago, sick at heart and tied to the words of a dying argument, out of my own darkness I offered the Nameless a sudden, single-minded plea: *show me the center of the self*: and slept hard, dreamless, waking in the dark with my whole body full of light. And what I saw—though I might now say *wheel* or *rose*, *pulse of fire* or *sunrise*—it was not these. I did not feel joy—I was it. I blazed. I did not think—*There it is* or *Here*. I blazed. Next moment, I was touching pillow, collarbone, table, wrist, and thinking in metaphor. Flower and fruit on a single branch broken off the one body of the world of light.



## IV

Tonight, though I would like to ease  
the length of my body along the length  
of my husband's and enter, breath  
by breath, the heat two bodies make,  
being *with*—

tonight I sit by myself  
and study the monolith of stone  
laid above the fireplace,  
imagining the sweat, the struggle,  
the sheer will, back-breaking,  
and the final pride of heaving  
it into place, then the crude clay,  
slapped together, to anchor it.  
I've seen no lintel stone as great,  
but for the one in a crofter's cottage  
on Iona—so he was, that Connecticut  
farmer, a Scot perhaps, with  
bristled eyebrows like my husband's,  
like my father's. His, too,  
the blue chips of china  
I've unearthed in the garden bed  
as I shovel down—my muscles sore  
with that labor tonight, knees stiff  
as I listen to Samuel Barber's  
translation of prayer into song—

*Thou who art unchangeable,  
may we find our rest and remain  
in Thee unchanging—*

Kierkegaard's  
words, and I see how  
one thing builds on another, this room  
a poem making room for  
Barber, the barred owl's plaintive



hooing in the deep wood,  
the far cry of a ferry horn  
remembered in the foggy straits  
between Mull and Iona—  
word on word, stone on  
stone, note on note, heaving,  
how we rise from the daily midden  
of our patch-worked living  
and dying.

What is prayer  
if not a marriage  
of passion and the opposing need  
for quiet loneliness? What is  
a poem, if not the death cry  
of each moment's hard-won  
and abandoned self? What is  
the self?

*This house, it's a thin place,*  
I think. The wind outside  
might be the wind that summons  
the far-away and brings, as near  
as breath, the spirit of the dead  
watching.

Who *are* you?  
I ask the acres of emptiness  
into which everything is gathered  
and *is*—  
turning the question  
at last toward my own heart,  
blind and stupefied—*Who?*



## EAST WINDOW, MOON

It shadows the bed with a lattice of light,  
this moon whose ridgepole sinks beneath its own weight,  
  
rising slowly, laboriously, late.

I'm in a new house, unfamiliar to my feet,  
strange to fingers that touch the walls uncertainly

as I walk through the dark of it at night.  
Outside, different trees, different stones on the path.

Closer to death I want to know great faith *and* great doubt.

What no one taught me, that's what I want to remember,  
immersed like Blake, his inner eye

a storehouse for the infinite  
flashings the fontanel lets in, before it knits the bone door shut.

I have always been alone, and I have never been alone.

What I used to call *the self* is a windowing of light  
in the flood plain of the boundless.



## TRYING TO PRAY

The light is such  
that now

the beech leaves  
anchor

midair gold

against the farther hollows  
and afternoon

shadows  
beyond the pond

The branches  
rise and fall

like swans' wings  
soaring

against tether  
then, easy

sinking back—

as once, within brief-lit  
radiance

someone I  
had thought to be

fell impeccably  
silent



WHAT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL UNCREATED  
ESSENCE OF ALL THINGS?

I don't know why  
this dried lilac leaf  
brings me  
near your son's  
life—self-fallen,  
brief. Too brief.  
It resembles the pipal  
with its sharp  
steeple, as ephemeral  
as the sting of  
pleasure—remember  
the branch lush with flower?  
A lure, a snare  
not sure enough  
to keep us here.  
And look, within  
the border of the leaf  
an empty tree  
(given in sparse  
calligraphy,  
three brushstrokes, four)  
and why one might sense  
in it *failure*  
or *pain* or *grief*  
and not a holy silence,  
I can't say  
having fallen too far  
beyond *leaf, self, safe*—  
and bowing, not knowing why.



## SPOOL OF RED THREAD

As if a surgeon pried inside with a crochet hook, caught up an artery,  
and tugged—

and every tidy thread of blood spilled, spooled itself, coiled round  
and wound into an open

wound I need to staunch . . .

As if, unwinding the spool, I could prepare the needle and take the Chinese red  
silk jacket,

frayed beyond repair, and stitch it up . . .

As if the cirrus web of roads on the map I opened, *sotto voce*, has lifted me  
beyond the city, into an empty red clay field . . .

As if between my legs. A thread of blood, the unraveled smocking of the womb.



## STILL LIFE, WITH BINOCULARS

Hot summer night, cicadas . . .

Before I turn off the kitchen light, I pause.

There's a soft breeze: an apparent rustling in the cobalt vase

of dried green hydrangeas, the green Elga uses

in her watercolors for the ripened light of shadows. . . .

And so, on the table below her painting, I've put peaches,  
two full plates of them: two plump mangoes,

two bottles of red wine resting on their sides: Merlots:

reflecting in their upturned bases widening halos

of erratic light, through which I look back: years and years:

to bedclothes, rumpled bedclothes

and the wide mirror I'd look into, lying on my side. Who knows

what I longed for then: who knows

what longings from those years I still compose, refuse, or fuse. . . .

Listening now to the cicadas

I see only the doubling of desire long marriage bestows,  
and a restless acceptance that grows

beyond desire into ripe stillness: and repose.



## IRIS

On its tall stalk, petals deep amethyst  
with an under-light of verdigris that flared as the clouds passed  
and sun lit its silks,

it was a stupa in a forest glade  
or the refuge of one who would chant the holy name breath by breath.

It grew in the garden of a woman who had died days before.

I was drawn to it perhaps because of its color,  
mysterious as the Old Russian cry to God, *gospodi*.  
I did not bow to it.

My spine straightened  
as I stood quietly there to study its architectural trinities,

petals that opened down as if to touch damp earth, three  
that lifted skyward, close enough  
to make a tent,

a sanctuary  
within which three more, lavender and yellow, hovered over

the pistil, white and still. I remembered the door in my old dream,  
beyond which, I once thought, the riddle of birth and death  
lay revealed.

The door was white. It was shining. It was shut—  
but no. It wasn't shut. It wasn't even a door. It was the light of a single eye.

Whatever I look at, it looks back.



ON BEING ASKED IF THE ANKLET I'M WEARING IS AN  
OLD CHARM BRACELET OF MINE

I reply  
by stamping my foot  
until the gemstones and pearls are a fierce rush of fire,  
a dance called  
*taking the shortcut home. . . .*

I reply by pointing to  
the cold moon's rim in the whirl and tumble-by river  
on whose ripples dove cry scatters. . . .

I reply with the gesture  
the oldest and most purely naked of women would make  
to inhabit  
*the high wild notes of mountains by the sea. . . .*



## AIR AND EARTH

As anchor for this lute song, sung in late  
midwinter, I hold in mind a ripe pear  
from one of the two trees behind your gate,  
a dooryard pear, a pear of the back field's  
April froth, sun-borne October's firm lute,  
if split in half for eating—as you would  
split it, eat it, let its pulpy nectar  
run down your chin, then spit the seeds out  
and whistle.

*That* your song, *this* mine—lustral,  
and meant to summon you back to the field  
I walked, you worked. We'd not have swapped shovels  
at the rabbit hole when you lived. I loved  
words, their sweet roots. You were of the land,  
mud and clay packed tight, and mostly mute—

for all your rough-hewn ways, a gentle man  
who liked a flannel shirt, a stogie,  
and work out of doors in any weather—more than  
anything, liked the truth of hard-to-lie-  
still stone walls, the undermining heave of frost,  
cedars the cows scratched their backs against,  
the fields manured, then mowed: life unadorned,  
unaneled—

you were your own authority.  
After you died, on a bright still day, unsure,  
I walked the deer-trail, horned-owl, backwoods way  
over the stile into your upland pasture.  
There I could see. There I could see clear  
down to the road that bears your name. If you were  
anywhere, I vowed, you'd be here.



I saw a thaw-melt sun, calix gold  
on lucent, low patches of ice on the road.  
I saw the far lake, blue sky, a tor of clouds  
over the bog you cranberried as a child.  
I saw what you'd tended, and what left wild  
for the red-tailed hawks. *Everett Watson*,  
I called, my arms spread wide, wide  
as I turned round in the field:

*you, Everett,*

*I know you're out here*—and do you know,  
the wind swept up the steep field, fierce as a harrow,  
but prankish, too, as you had been: a blow,  
a sough, a rough kiss, a rollicking volute,  
a whet of appetite. Was it your Spirit?  
Wind, for sure. But evidence of spirit,

particular spirit—yours—there was none.  
The wind was traceless. If an expanse of spirit,  
also a tumult I had to own.  
I wanted you come back to ease my heart.  
Why must you die—why must I?  
The big wind had no answer. The wind  
had no answer. It was your quiet,  
magnified. It was nothing I could know.  
Even so,

*I say lute, light, pear tree, gate.*

Now, I say it. Song is its own authority.  
Then, I stood in the quiet of your field.  
Wiregrass bent its whole length along the earth,  
a flare of light unfolding—and the light  
and garlands of wind, spread low, were enough.



## TRANSPARENT

One day I will not wake in my body as you know it,  
or go from the bed to the open  
door to breathe in the fresh glory of the morning.

Although you will not see me, by afternoon I will be  
wind, unfenced in the expanse  
between towering clouds of oyster and plum air.

I will be in the oak, in the ivy, in the spillway  
and banks thick with iris,  
yellow-eyed and blue, and in the tannic and bittersweet

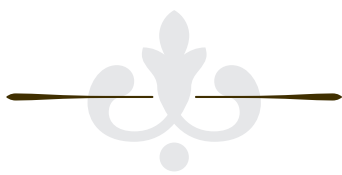
silk of the pond over which clouds pause and reflect  
before shattering the surface.  
I will be in the rain, in the stone, in the root, in the fruits

of the garden. You will take me into your mouth  
(as so often you have)  
and we will be one body of solitudes and barrens and wilds.

We will be mountain and cirrus, salamander, owl in the dark  
husk of winter, a crescendo  
of cicadas in summer. We will fly in a green flash of light

over fields taking shape in the early morning mists. Here,  
always here. So close, there is  
nothing deeper I can tell you than what we already know.











## NOTES

*Part I* is dedicated to the memory of Jean North Mitchell.

The title “What Cannot Be Kissed Away” is from a phrase of Jane Hirshfield’s.  
“All the way to heaven is heaven” is from Catherine of Siena (“Ashes”).  
Charles Chu is a painter and calligrapher who lives in New London, Connecticut.

### *Part II*

I wish to thank James Scully for his thoughtful suggestions as “Fuel,” “Moment,”  
and “Respect” evolved.  
“Respect” is dedicated to Richiena Brown.  
“One Body” is dedicated to Peter Matthiessen.

*Part III* is dedicated to the memory of my father, mother, and sister.

“Word over all, beautiful as the sky” is from Walt Whitman (“Elegy for My Father”).  
“Ask Me Now” is for my sister Elizabeth.

*Part IV* is dedicated to the memory of Hobart Mitchell.

“blind and stupefied” is from William Butler Yeats (“Poetry Is the Spirit of the  
Dead, Watching”).  
“What is the Fundamental Uncreated Essence of All Things?” is for Lysbet Rogers.  
“Iris” is dedicated to Marcia Kelly and Francoise Krampf.  
“On Being Asked . . .” is for Sam Pickering, who asked the question.  
“the high wild notes of mountains by the sea” is from Gary Snyder.  
“Transparent” is for David and our life of waking up together.



