Mothers of Us All: When Does Political Message Take Precedence over Art in Some Modern and Contemporary Women’s Poetry

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MOTHERS OF US ALL: WHEN DOES POLITICAL MESSAGE TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER ART IN SOME MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY

by

Shanda Hansma Blue Easterday

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MOTHERS OF US ALL: WHEN DOES POLITICAL MESSAGE TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER ART IN SOME MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY

Shanda Hansma Blue Easterday, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2004

This dissertation contains an essay with the above title, as well as two sections of poems. The first section of poems is entitled *Maria Sibylla Merian, Artist and Naturalist*, and is a collection of poems about, and in the voice of, Merian. Many of these are what are known as *persona* poems. The second section of poems is entitled *The Beekeeper’s Wife*, and uses autobiography as a framework for communicating the humor in human relationships, and for illustrating the surrealism in the human race’s relationships with the natural world.

My research for my essay entailed the study of the poetry and criticism of writers including, but not limited to, Anne Sexton, Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Maxine Kumin, Harold Bloom, Kate Daniels, and Helen Vendler. The purpose of my research was to determine whether and when a poet’s political message seemed more important in her poetry than the writing of poetry as art or pure creativity.

My research for the section of poems entitled *The Beekeeper’s Wife* entailed the study of bee culture and beekeeping, as well as forays into readings on fishing and hunting practices in Michigan. For the section of poems entitled *Maria Sibylla Merian, Artist and Naturalist* I studied an exhibit of original prints from her engravings at the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. I also read and studied various
books containing prints of her works in color and black-and-white. I read Natalie Zemon Davis’ biographical essay on Merian in her book entitled *Women on the Margins*. I also read about various of the flora Merian illustrated, and I researched the histories of various pigments as they might have been used during Merian’s lifetime.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I also wish to thank my husband, Robert W. Easterday for introducing me to beekeeping in our own backyard. I thank him as well as my children, Danyi Hansma Heckaman, Morgan Genevieve Blue and Graydon Courtney Blue, for their patience with my continual need to be closeted in my office to contemplate and write.

Finally, I thank Herbert Scott for the opportunity to work and study in the English Department at WMU, and for his patient critical and editorial comments on both my creative work and my critical scholarship. He is chief among those who have encouraged me. The other members of this tribe know who they are, and I thank them as well.

Shanda Hansma Blue Easterday
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MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN
ARTIST AND NATURALIST
1647 - 1717
... patience is a very beneficial little herb

... as is rue or submission in a woman's repertoire. How many times have I said this to myself? I began at thirteen to study the metamorphosis of the silkworm bred by immigrant Dutch in our community. I hope to discover new species for yarn spinning, but on my journey combine botanical, and artistic worlds; draw flowers, floral wreaths, herbaceous baskets, decorative bouquets for upper-class ladies who wish to occupy themselves with drawing, watercolor, or embroidery after their household duties. I study insects in gardens inside and beyond the gates of Nürnberg. One day during my stay I find great numbers of the large gold, yellow and black caterpillar in the grass at the moat in Altdorff, and when I go up to my own garden next to the imperial chapel to view flowers and look for caterpillars, I find much slime on the green leaves of the golden yellow lilies. To find its source, I touch it with my slender rod. It appears as if the leaves might be rotting; then I find in the slimy trail a great many small, red, round creatures, like tiny beetles, sitting with their heads close together and immobile, even when I touch them roughly. I take many home together with the leaves, in order to investigate what will become of them.

continued / stanza break

...patience is a very beneficial little herb

continued

On one August eleventh three young larks are brought to me alive; I kill them in my kitchen to cook them. Three hours later as I am about to pluck them, there are three fat maggots on them, even though I had covered them immediately so nothing of this kind could come to them. These maggots have no feet yet they are able to hold quite fast to the larks' feathers. By the next day the grubs change into completely brown eggs. On August twenty-sixth there come out many pretty green and blue flies which are so quick I catch only five of them.
Johanna Helena is fourteen years old and Dorothea Maria is four. My house buzzes with moths, butterflies — *summer birds* — and my company of maidens. I teach transparent and opaque water-color techniques only; by law we are forbidden to paint in oils. Even here we have heard what Michelangelo Buonarotti said about painting in oils being merely for women, the rich and the slothful. We are not sculptors like him, but we do with what we are given to express reverence for God with our floral illustrations on parchment and fabrics.

From Nürnberg, Mistress Clara requests my copper engravings, and embroidery patterns to paint. I don’t know which floral prints she has, but send a list of all flowers from *Der Raupenbuch* and *Neues Blumenbuch*; a rose from the caterpillar book, as well as the dark half-rose from the flower volume. I instruct her to paint the enclosed lily in light blue, and wish she might see all these blooms alive for herself as their shapes and colors would astonish her. She might fetch the illuminated *Blumenbuch* from Mistress Mates to see the colors I can only poorly describe in my horrible handwriting. If she colours these engravings — these line drawings — well, they will bring her fame; I would hang one in my studio to be seen by my students and our families, to help further her artistic career. Is it too much to hope someday she may be allowed to include her paintings in her brother’s album, to its improvement, or at least as an addition?
Young, I discovered the metamorphosis – caterpillars cocooning to become winged beauties – and marveled at the Vienna emperor moth years before I knew its name and habits. Caterpillars of a green like the young grass of spring, a lovely straight black stripe along the back, across each segment another dash of jet out of which four little white round beads glisten iridescent, among these a yellow-gold oval spot and under them a white pearl. Long and short inky hairs sprout out of each gem, so stiff one could imagine being pricked by them. Beneath the first three verdant sections three red claws on each side, then two empty segments, after which, four tiny spring-green feet, and at the end a foot on each side. This larva dines on the cherry leaf but will eat its sibling if food is short. Full sized it weaves itself a tough and lustrous cocoon, bright as silver and oval round, wherein it sheds its skin and changes into a liver-colored date stone seeming pupa. The dattelkern rests motionless until mid-August when the moth breaks out to take flight. This night bird, a frequent feature of my floral still-life paintings, is white with gray patches, yellow eyes and two brown fuzzy feelers. On each

*continued / no stanza break*
wing large black, white, and yellow concurrent circles, wing ends brown, very outer tips wear two rose-colored spots. By day quiet, but at night very restless; I know it well, we have this much in common.
To the very noble, virtuous Mistress Clara Regina Im Hoff, who is experienced in matters of art, for delivery along with a small package to her own hands at the Herrnmark. In Nürnberg, postage free

I report that I have received the beautiful, well-executed painting from his Holiness with particularly great joy and such shall suffice, as it will be seen by many fine ladies. I wish from the bottom of my heart I could return the great favour immediately, and you should ask of me again such as could be compared to this. You have used beautiful carmine – very hard to come by – for the roses. Congratulations to your cousin on the birth of his dear son. May God permit him to honour his father. I shall treasure and keep this painting all my life, as it gives me greater pleasure than a silver cup, and boundless contentment to see that you devote yourself more and more to your art and do not grow neglectful, but instead beautify my line drawings with your own precious skills.

I received your pleasing letter and learned from it that you require a jar of varnish and 2 shells of ground paint, along with lace patterns printed on green paper. I have enquired after them everywhere but cannot obtain any at all. Thus I enclose 2 shells of ground paint and a small jar of good varnish, which I have thinned out so it will last a long while. It costs 30x, and the paint 12x, amounting to 42x, a considerable investment.
To the very noble, virtuous Mistress Clara Regina Im Hoff

continued

When you have varnished something, and it has dried but is not sufficiently shiny, then you can paint another coat over it until it takes on a brilliant patina. I would ask that you give the money to Mistress Aurwin. If you have further need of paint, I have sent pretty colours to her so you will be able to obtain them. Otherwise, I offer you my humble services at your leisure. You need only ask, and I shall remain diligent for the remainder of my days in rendering pleasant service to you and your dear family. Please accept fond greetings from me and my family to you and your dear ones.

I remain always

My highly honoured Mistress's humble servant, Maria Sibila Graffin
Frankfurt, December 8th, 1684

Naples Yellow

Radiant sun ends darkness as the chemist mixes twelve ounces ceruse, two ounces of the sulphuret of antimony, one half ounce calcined alum, one ounce of sal ammoniac. He pulverizes, mixes these ingredients thoroughly, places them into a capsule or crucible of clay, covers this and exposes it to gentle heat which is increased gradually until the capsule is moderate red. The mix must have five hours’ exposure to heat to complete its oxidation, calcination, become Neapelgelb. Naples yellow, ground in water on a porphyry slab with an ivory spatula because to use iron implements would alter its color. This paste, this yellow oxide of lead and antimony then dries and is preserved for use. Excellently permanent, extremely toxic, it sits on a shelf in the back room, waits for someone, myself or one of my young ladies, to call for it. If a more golden hue is required the chemist increases sulphuret of antimony and muriate of ammonia. If the painter wishes it more fusible, sulphuret of antimony and calcined sulphate of alumina increase. Artists use it since 1500 B.C. Perhaps I will mix it with lead white, make it lighter to paint bananas and the Caligo teucer which feeds on them. I’ll use a pale shade for the spots on the little lizard, Cnemidophorus lemniscatus, whose portrait with three of her eggs I include in this plate because she built her nest in the floor of my little house. She laid four eggs which I took with me on my journey back to Holland as they were hatching. Sadly none of these offspring survived.

continued / no stanza break

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Certainly I can use this pigment in all its shades for my study of the yellow-brown compound blossom of the evening primrose. In some cultures yellow is the color of weddings, celebrations, the hue of joy, glory and wisdom. Maybe this was my mistake: not wearing yellow to wed.
To Madame Clara Regine Scheuring, née im Hoff in Nürnberg with a dish of carmine red

Most noble, honorable and virtuous Madame,

I am sending a little carmine red
for use in your beautiful artwork
which I have seen in your brother’s album.
It has been years since I have heard
from my dear friends, and I confess
it would make me happy to hear something,
or see some of them. There are rarities
from the East and West India to be had
by a collector here in Holland
that I shall be happy to send in exchange
for all kinds of creatures found in Germany;
snakes, butterflies, stag beetles, all put in
jars filled with brandy, well sealed with wood.

If you wish to kill a butterfly quickly
hold the point of a darning needle in a flame,
make it hot or glowing red, just as if
to do a minor surgery on someone
in your household. Stick the heated pin
into the butterfly which will die immediately
with no damage to its wings. Coat
the little boxes in which you place them
with lavender oil first so that no worms
can get in and feed on them. If anyone
desires any sorts of seeds of Indian
spices they are also available
here. I remain the devoted servant
of you and all your noble friends.

Maria Sibylla Merian
Amsterdam, August 29th, 1697 3

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Daubers

When I paint wasps fly before my eyes
and hum around my head. Near my paint box
they built a nest of mud, round as if thrown
on a potter’s wheel; it stands on a protective
earthen foundation where they’ve bored
a small entrance. They carry in caterpillars,
or worms, just as ants do, to feed their young
and themselves. The buzz in my studio
never stops. Because their multiplying
numbers threaten my own household,
I break up the wasps’ house and see inside
all that they have made, yet for music there
are lantern flies, beetles, moths, bees and
butterflies in all stages to accompany
the quiet application of brush
to watercolor to vellum.

———

4

Model for Plate 18

My Indian woman told me about the huge, hairy *orthognathous* spider which dwells on the guava among brown web-spiders. It is black and covered with hair all over, supplied with sharp teeth and gives deep dangerous bites, injects fluid into the wounds. It does not spin long webs and its habitual prey are ants who cannot escape as they creep over the tree. When it fails to find *hymenopteron* it takes small birds from their nests and sucks the blood from their bodies. This great spider may be the model for Anansi, hero and anti-hero of slaves’ creation and trickster stories. I portray one here as it devours a hummingbird, the usual diet of shamans who are forbidden other food. The bird’s beak is displaced by the spider’s force.

In this model ants eat a beetle, and counterattack arachnids. Pismires in this country construct insect bridges and build cellars so well formed that you’d say *they were the work of human beings*, but these ants are violent. They burst forth once each year in countless numbers, fill up the houses, move from one chamber to the next, stinging, and sucking the blood of any creature they meet. They gobble up a large spider in the blink of an eye; even people have to flee. When they’ve eaten the whole house clean, they make for the next, and next, and next until, satiated, they return to their cellar.  

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Study for Plate 26

On March twenty-six in Suriname spring
is much like other seasons in these tropics:
little change except the more pale shade of green
on emerging leaves. I want to paint brighter
colors, but this subject matter is subdued.
The cacao tree, cauliflorous, like so many
other arbores in the rain-forest, bears
both its golden yellow fruit and numerous
tiny pale pink blossoms while it supports
large leaves glossy and stiff with grassy color
all the year. With their long sticks the Indians
knock ripe pods from the tree, separate the beans
and spread them on banana leaves to ferment
for nine days. They sun-dry for a week,
then roast over a hot fire for three-quarters
of an hour. The natives make a drink of this
same seed shelled and ground fine as we do
in Amsterdam. I wish to capture the life
cycle of this moth, white with black stripes
and dots when imago emerges
from its chrysalis fourteen days after
its antecedent black-and-red-striped
caterpillar encases itself in a new
cocoa leaf. Is this creature’s winged version
the ultimate phase of its life? Inside
the cocoon is where growth and change occur,
in the way my own transformation grew
inside my marriage, then I flew with my daughter
beneath ship’s wings from Holland, from divorce,
to Suriname where life and art renew,
blooming and fruitful.
My swart Slavinne tells me which toads taste good, which worms are roasted on charcoal, eaten by Indians as a delicacy, which plants treat diarrhea, worms and scalp maggots; which plants yield seed capsules for brooms, seeds to string for armbands for young women, fiber to spin for hammocks, dyes to decorate the bodies of men; how the women make bread from the cassava root. She tells me which plants help incantations protect her against evil spirits, which snakes are sacred, how the shaman priest purifies himself and cures natives with tobacco. She brought me the orange maggot of Plate 27 when my chrysalis, intended for that work, died before the greenest of grasshoppers could emerge therefrom. She knew of the fever cure from the bark of a common rainforest tree. Dorothea and I put this remedy to good use in the unbearable heat. Cockroaches are daily in our clothing and food, and we must not touch a certain hairy caterpillar lest our hands swell painfully. Nature is not so simple here. Plums, grapes and vanilla grow everywhere, and could be harvested in abundance if not for the preoccupation with sugar cultivation. There are green and yellow caterpillars which spin a cocoon of thread so strong it would make a good silk and yield great profit. I would dye it to embroider those floral patterns

continued / no stanza break
I designed in youth, but Suriname saps
my strength and quiets Dorothea as well.
Those were cooler days at home
in my stepfather’s studio in Frankfurt
am Main when all I had was worlds of flowers,
and the infrequent insect or suitor.
More colorful than number twenty-six is this castor-oil plant, *Heliconius ricini* butterfly and greater sacktail caterpillar in shades of turquoise, yellow and rust, with a pale tan moth and unnamed larva on the single large palmate leaf below the compound blue-green and yellow flower just beginning to bloom. The left four stems look as if chopped or chewed off, near as they are to the edge of the parchment. Maria forced the sacktail out from its protective envelope of webbing and leaf fragments to paint it suspended on the page between blossom and leaf just as she is unsettled between the heat of Suriname and her home in Amsterdam. These caterpillars hang as if lying in a hammock, as the Indians do, she notes on this page of her *Studienbuch*. Both larva and indigene are more at ease than she can be as she walks among castor shrubs on a hot, dry sunny day. She hears their carpels explode and feels the force of seeds expelled to bounce off her hat, her hands, her bag and folded easel. The female *ricinus* flower with its spiny ovary and feathery red stigma receives from winds and breezes the pollen of the male bloom below. Stamens are so numerous on the blossom it appears to smoke as it sheds its powdery grains in a gust. There are no true petals.

*continued / no stanza break*
in these clusters. The natives burn the oil of *ricinus communis* in their lamps and treat wounds with it despite the poison in its bean-like seeds. These look like the engorged mottled bodies of some ticks, but kindle the appetite of the child or animal who dies of eating them.
Pompeian Blue

I paint faithful forget-me-nots and violets, wedding ribbons of lapis, speedwell bouquets, spikes of iris, and each time I grind cuprorivaite from the lava of Vesuvius, wish for precious mineral oil from Cremora, I dream of the blue Tyrrhenian Sea, Capri’s terraced citrus groves, the volcano through the early morning haze of a balcony window adorning some country inn along the road from Sorrento to Pompeii, or on the Amalfi coast, vineyards, olive groves and the perpetual poppies, severely pruned mulberry trees lining the shop-front streets of every Italian village, yearn for Murano glass-makers on their island in the lagoon at Venice: their azure secret. Other sources for shades like this Ägyptisch Blau are easier to find and use, but none remain so impervious to time and the elements as this Neapolitan mineral which colors portraits of Ramses III, the robes of the Virgin. So I prefer this tint; art and its practitioners were ever difficult. If only marriage were as adamantine to weather change and growth as Pompeian blue from the slopes of sleeping Monte Vesuvio.
Here is a picture of a curative cotton leaf Jatropha, the root of which, my black maid-servant tells me, is used by natives to treat snakebite; its leaves used as a purgative, its blossoms and seeds in enemas, to ease the symptoms of diseases I do not know. This plant’s habitant, the anteus moth, marked with spots of gold, gray-beige flame-stitched wings, has a supremely long proboscis. Too lengthy for the tiny red flowers I’ve drawn at the tip of the branch with a single green fruit, this snout, we must believe, is used for much deeper throated blossoms, like the hibiscus. Pale green ribs, small gold dots above each creeper-foot, plump and long is the caterpillar of this moth. I paint its shriveled brown shed skin on a leaf next to it, on the leaf below I color its feces, or that of some other insect, and on the lowest leaf a full reddish-brown chrysalis, home for now to the pupa, like my small full house is home to my embryonic project, this book, this metamorphosis. For contrast I draw in the mimicry moth, so much smaller but more golden, its tubular snout so much shorter than that of anteus, more fitting for these yellow accented, crimson blooms. This little moth’s chrysalis I sketch on the branch and color in gold, perhaps one sixth the size of the other, and the yellow caterpillar, ribs nearly indiscernible, climbs from one verdant leaf to another, about a tenth the size of the lengthy, pallid green one. Its solar-bright color balances it, makes it equal in visual attraction to any other insect object of this printer’s plate.
Peacock Flower

Its seeds used to promote quick labor or to abort babies so they will not be born slaves, Maria labels it *Flos Pavonis*, finds it listed in *Flora Malabarica* under *Christa Pavonis*. The plant appears much like the sweet pea with its compound leaf and flower, but much larger; a thirty foot tall arch of graceful, nearly horizontal branches bearing foot-long pea pods. It is a Royal Poinciana, grows in Suriname, this Flame Tree with its brilliant crimson flowers, foot-long stamens or pistils, three- or four-foot compound leaves like a huge beach pea or giant prairie clover. In Plate 45 Merian paints it out of proportion, about the size of *Lathyrus odoratus*, and host to a pale green caterpillar two feet long if drawings were accurate, its brown pupa and resultant gray-brown, white and gold moth would be larger than many birds, but even in the New World this is not the case. She might have written of this moth, as she did of one in Plate 3, *Viewed through the magnifying glass, the dust on the wings looks like brown, white and black feathers of multi-colored chickens, the body covered with hair like that of a bear, proboscis like a goose’s neck. As for the tree, when a rare hard frost kills Delonix Regia, even the neighbors miss it; slave mothers and their children still believe after death they will be reborn free, at home in their own country.*
The natives here use the plum-like fruit of this tabrouba tree to make durable black body paint and a milky substance to repel insects. I draw the light sky-sue blossoms at the end of a deep green leaved branch where the pale gold highlighted, cream colored grub of the stag beetle flying upper right dines on a faded foliole as a palm weevil digs into the bark below. I know this weevil’s larva infests the palm tree, but, all trunk and huge man-sized leaves, those are too large to paint accurately on this parchment. In a leaf-crotch under, a small golden cocoon rests; directly to the left of the weevil, on a viridescent fruit, creeps a hairy yellow-ribbed caterpillar, clothesbrush-like, belonging, perhaps, to the orchid bee rampant, lower center. Of course some of this is supposition, I take license with my subject matter. Today I feel creative, merely draw and paint to construct an artful composition, however disorganized and unrelated the objects. I know the beetle and its larva surround and inhabit this tree. The others I have seen, if not in a sapling like this, then in some other rainforest seedling of my explorations.
I set out into the forest of Suriname
to find this graceful red-blossoming tree.
Even the natives cannot name
its crimson fronds like the spider
chrysanthemum. It is home
to a large red caterpillar wearing
three blue beads on each segment
and a black feather protruding from each.
I set up my easel within good view
of this limb, but the composition
of this parchment is disorganized as
my emotions at leaving Suriname
to return to Amsterdam with Dorothea.
Hanging from a stem is a strange chrysalis
decorated much in shades of green
and brown, shaped like the larva that made it,
but later the emergent butterfly
appears, a brilliant shining cobalt,
much like the great atlas of Holland.
When I painted it, the picture seemed
unbalanced until I filled the upper
right corner with a large blue butterfly
much like *morpho achilles*, or *morpho
menelaus* which looks like polished silver
overlaid with the loveliest ultramarine, green and purple; it cannot
possibly be rendered with the paint brush,
and yet I tried, using a fine, pointed brush
to apply jewel-like color to the finest vellum,
carta non natia, the skin of unborn
animals, much smoother than canvas,
wood, or handmade paper. Look at it
under the magnifying glass; the texture of the wings of the azure butterfly appears like blue roof tiles in orderly arrangement. In the painting is a place just right for the small wasp the Indians call ‘wild wasp of Maribonse,’ perhaps used in stinging wasp mats for Waiyana children’s rites of passage. It reminds me why I wish to return home.
Mr. Johan Georg Volkammer
Medicinae doctor in Nürnberg

Monsieur!

I continue my work painting in life size on parchment in all their perfection the worms and caterpillars I nourish daily with food, as I observe their transformations. It was a hard and costly journey to acquire these rarities. The staggering heat in Suriname kills stronger people than I at their labors.

I currently still have jars with liquid containing one crocodile, many kinds of snakes, two large and eighteen small, and twenty round boxes of butterflies, beetles, humming birds, lantern flies, called in the Indies lute-players for their sound, eleven iguanas, one gecko and one small turtle, all for sale. You need only to order. I have people in America who catch such fauna and send them for me to sell. I hope to receive examples from the Spanish West Indies as soon as ships are allowed to travel there. Only God knows when that will happen. With cordial greetings I remain the gentleman’s

Devoted servant
Maria Sybilla Merian
please extend my greetings to all mutual friends who ask for me
Amsterdam, October 8th, 1702

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THE BEEKEEPER'S WIFE
White on White

Sunrise was just at that height
where the lake was lit, pale gray
and white, not yet blue.
A sun-imbued cloud settled
on the water, filled our little valley;
invisible lake, white on white,
no horizon. We saw from our window
framed by dazzled oaks, cottonwoods,
two swans at their morning swim
from the cloud bank, slowly
become visible, talking to themselves,
swimming toward our shore
as if in the cloud, in the sky,
white on white, no horizon.
She Hunts Alone

There is little to do for bees in spring after harvesting honey from hives that died in winter, so she hunts. As a single stalker she leaves less human smell and track in the woods and fields. Even pea-brained wild turkeys are elusive, avoid signs of human society, but this spring she has a new matte black rifle guaranteed not to reflect a hint of her presence before a bird is in range. She takes her backpack ready to lug poultry out of the woods; sets out each morning with her collection of mouth, box, slate and tube calls to tempt a large neighborhood tom close to her blind. She starts with an owl call, gets no response; moves to soft hen purrs and clucks but he evades her, counts his hen harem when he hears each call to make sure no bird has gone astray. On rainy days his covey takes to the fields; they can’t hear their enemies in woods when rain beats leaves. He takes time from patrolling his ridge to fight off young males who hope to horn in on his bevy. She notices this even in her daily defeats; decides on the seventh day to become a he-turkey, competitor on the strut. She hikes out to her oak tree blind, settles in for the wait, clutches her gobbler shaker and gobbles hard. The old boss tom comes on the trot to defend his territory; he doesn’t see her gun.
The beekeeper’s wife fishes for bass. She’s seen them come up beneath ducklings, swallow them whole, little webbed feet still paddling, waving from the mouth of their destiny. She believes there’s nothing like the splashy strike of an eight pound largemouth bass as it takes a topwater lure; the cast, a vicious strike, and a shallow-water battle of gill-rattling jumps excites her even more than spring honey. She uses single-props, walking baits and poppers in lakes and rivers fifty degrees or warmer. She knows when water is cooler bass are lethargic, won’t rise to the surface to feed where she can see them strike the lure, where they are momentarily airborne, made metallic by the sun. The skirmish arouses her. She loves hand-painted baits, jewel-like, shiny as any shad or minnow water-born for larger fish to eat. She thinks, with their treble hooks designed to get a barbed tip in the mouth or gill of any fish that strikes, double-props look more vicious than anything she wants to do with a finned creature. Instead she makes her Spook or Creek Walker sashay through water in a zigzag called “walking the dog” that fools bass as they surface school. She gives them time to read the menu; tempts great lunkers by slowing her lure. She points her rod at the fish, takes up slack line until she feels the tug on the other end; steadies her arm and wrist, turns her body swiftly, sweeps the rod and sets her hook.
The beekeeper fishes the Au Sable’s East Branch for trout. Browns and brookies hide in dark pools and rise to spinners and flies on light line cast carefully as he wades the riverbed. He avoids Opening Day when too many anglers, like too many deer hunters, hit the wooded streams and shores of rivers regardless of hatch, cloud cover, frightening fish into retreat. He favors fly fishing, respects his finned foe, dresses for the match in tweed jacket, string tie, and stetson pinned with lures. The beekeeper ties flies for every hatch from Adams to Woolly Bugger, slow-stalks the streambed silent as leaf-float. He casts precise rod strokes from 10 to 2 on an imaginary clock face in the sky, lands his fly softly on the water’s surface and repeats, repeats, repeats ’til flashing trout takes bait. He’s learned to night-fish the hex hatch, hears that pop like a snook munching on prey. That pop addicts anglers for life, causes dreams of flies the size of bats, makes him rope himself to a tree, cast to that silty hole where the Old One drifts, awaits hexagenia limbata’s birth to leap star-ward, make wake repeatedly, until he’s too full to move further than the beekeeper’s hand-tied Robert’s Drake where it lands like the last giant caddis. This fisherman tolerates shoulder-to-shoulder anglers just to hear that pop and cast to that trout’s hideout. With the fish

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on his line he wants not to set the hook too hard to return his catch to water, lets it slip quiet from his hand to live to lurk in shadows of water-logs, fin gravelly hollows under the shoreline. He desires a rematch, needs no proof of having won this contest unless his wife requests rainbow for supper.
Ropewalk

In New Harmony, two mazes,
one a thatch-roofed, open, outdoor factory
of spiral narrow lanes where Friends walked
the ropewalk, wove hands-full of hemp
into rope or twined it into stiff string singing
hymns at their work.

The second a living thing of boxwood hedge,
a little square house for shelter at its center,
which you may find as you wander these furled streets.
People who do not consider the Minotaur,
his sister’s betrayal, sometimes get married there.
The boundary bushes once were taller than a man
but that way trapped too many. Now the hedge
is short enough for a tall woman in retreat
to look over and find her way out or further in
even without Ariadne’s ball of thread to guide her
in the rain in this town of raintrees.

Small gilt blossoms glisten
in sunset as if the sky had opened and poured
a shower on these trees. From branches
mourning doves call the long evening shadows
up from the ground and cat birds mock the cats’
prowl. The cats do not seem to listen
or worry about the odd child, Asterius:
head of a bull, body of a man, son of Pasiphaë,
who shines for all, and the dazzling white bull
that rose from the sea for her father’s sacrifice
to Poseidon. He was so handsome
Minos put him with his herd and slew another, excellent,
and earthly. Poseidon’s revenge was the love he caused
Pasiphaë for the bull. Minos built the Labyrinth, a maze,
to hide his daughter and grandchild…perhaps it is this myth
that makes us uneasy about windings and tangles,
makes us watch for Asterius beneath the golden raintrees.
The cats know the way through all the snarls in New Harmony.
Roses, like romantics, are out of season, obsolete. The potted pink in my office window, brought inside from the porch in autumn, has been attacked by whitefly and aphids because there are no ladybugs in the house. With the blossoms dried, the rose’s delicate leaves wrinkled, dropped all over the filing cabinet, the floor. Left with nothing blooming, in late February, overtaken by the need to invoke Spring, Persephone, some form of celebration, I pot tulip bulbs to fool and force the yellow-tipped quadruple red blossoms in the relative warmth of my livingroom window. I pot paper whites for my office, yellow daffodils with green leaf buds already showing next to the kitchen sink. I know this will make me sneeze, but, unless I perform this ritual, Spring may never come again.
E = mc²

Reading too much in a week-end
(drowning= asphyxiation by H₂O,
water, a mix, elemental chemistry
[How can we cool the cooling towers?
Where store the waste? How long?])
I surface wondering which book also
has a one-shoed man in it
or is that multi-display
large screen television?
Don’t call on a cellular phone.
This is a private conversation.
Does biology= telephone?
Is it like any other team
we could field in our favor?

As a child I could only wish
atoms had not split, been smashed,
when jets cracked our windows,
learned to fly faster than sound,
dropped practice bombs called “shapes”
as if they were an innocent cure
like blanc mange, calf’s-foot jelly,
or some other molded gelatin to sooth
the wire nerves of the universal mechanism
on its way to a super-collision
during math anxiety
when improper fractions were just
more ill-mannered numerals
while my systolic/diastolic surge,
like the tide, ripened.

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E = mc^2

DNA's high-tech hieroglyphics
in all these tenuous lives' events
add up to déjà-vu or not quite:
details differing in space or time
How long can we continue
to listen for order in chaos?
Physical scientists trying to decode
what poet-philosophers attempt to encrypt.
Matter cannot travel through space/time
to be in the same place at the same moment
but what matters? Where is it?
If E=mc^2 is the opposite true?
Can this relationship be reversed?
Yes, mathematically, and no, philosophically?

Are you in the equation? Caught
in the ethernet? A tourist
in cyberspace? Are you a cyborg?
Who is that on the inside of the VDT
backlit like a stageset?
A reflection of ourselves
or created in our image?
Like a file from the computer
escape through that super-cooled liquid,
the glass of the monitor's screen.
Undelete yourself.
Make this mechanism scroll forward again
with its boolean logic,
0=off, 1=on.
What does 2 do to the machine?
Does 3 equal chaos?

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E = mc²

continued

The elegance of the discs, hard, floppy, like hats, French chapeaux. The explicit sizes, 5½", 3½", wondrous math symbols containing “and,” yes, navel gazing.

Or am I out of the formula? What keys to use, what keystrokes? Writing, unable to speak, unable to think fast in company. Drained, not stimulated, by the presence of others at 12:11 a.m. or is it p.m.? Can you tell time at noon or midnight? Can you tell right from wrong on the spur of the moment in this continuum? Could the little death become the great death? Petit mal become grand mal? Lesions grow the way adhesions grow, like cancer? We don’t have far to go to be part of the solution. We are nearly all liquid.
On the shepherd's crook outside the kitchen window the hummingbird feeder attracts ants in the garden. In search of sugar they climb the neighboring pine and follow a bough out to the sweet-smelling feeder where they mount the yellow plastic flowers to fall and drown in the red liquid unless they can suck just a little, and resist the pull of the syrup. The hummingbirds perch on the other feeders hanging on the porch but only fly near the one in the pine boughs to catch a whiff and pass the ant infested object by. We drink our Sunday morning coffee, watch the birds, and talk of ways to stop the ants. I recall the ant poison my grandmother taught me to use under my kitchen sink; a tawny saccharine syrup ants take back to their nests to kill the rest, and stop the parade of marauders in the kitchen. I suggest this to the beekeeper, who imagines Kamikaze ants that eat the lethal stuff and climb into our sugar bowl to die and poison us.
Niger

Do we tell the hummingbirds to fly south
when we take in their red feeding stations
littered with drowned ants both red and black,
or do they leave without letting us know,
dress their wings and fly from this six acres
at the hint of winter in shorter days?
Do we invite the finches to stay through
the coldest days as we fill their feeder
with tiny black Niger thistle seed which,
if dropped uneaten in the herb garden
soil, sprouts small orange and yellow flowers
that dry tan and hard with prickly stems
in the fall so we gather them for dried
bouquets for the sunroom, wonder aloud
whether we should encourage this foreign-sounding weed in our yard, and remember our
friends who once cultivated ten foot tall
African thistles behind their garage
on a small island of few residents.
These grand purple blooms were bountiful
to look at and were about to go to seed
when we stood a ladder to take photos
and asked if they would be harvested soon?
Were the neighbors concerned? Would there be
giant thistles all over the island
in Spring? What finches would peck this huge seed?
No local goldfinch is so large and
hummingbirds would take no interest; still head
south this time of year. No thistle seed will
keep them, nor will their brightly colored
feeding stations, however freshly filled.
I could take the interstate, but I continue
my eternal search for blue herons and mud hens
(no need to look for mallards) in lakes and ponds
along the back roads and detours from Kalamazoo
to Valparaiso. I know I’m in Indiana; the restroom
doors in the hotel say Mens and Womens,
an illiteration perhaps, and when the desk clerk hears
my name he wants to know if I’m related
to the morning clerk, her last name is Blue, I say
Maybe. It’s a small family, but I’m not married
to them anymore, I know my location
because clouds of fluff-seeds from cottonwood
trees lining these shores make me cough and sneeze
as soon as I cross the state line so I dig allergy pills
and nasal spray out of my bag while I drive.
My civil presence is needed at a wedding.
Suppression is everything, acquiescence not needed
at this gathering of obligations where I am asked
to accompany my twenty-month-old grandson,
the ring-bearer, up the aisle of the university chapel
where we are wanted to follow the flower girl;
when she scatters rose petals on the floor
of this sacred place Guthrie, compelled to clean up
after, stoops to gather large red petals
that have somehow fallen in his path
and whose color reflects my face as he offers
them to my nose to smell, perhaps to sneeze,
while I attempt to convince him this nicety
is less necessary than getting the satin pillow
he drags by his side to the altar where
his mother, a bride’s maid, who whispered
to me as the procession started,
I’m ignoring him, Mom, I’m ignoring him,
and the rest of the wedding party
have turned to watch his progress.
The Maple Wood

was deep green until
nights of chill breeze
set the trees a feverish flush,
I thought they could recover
but the weather grew colder
and their shade turned
to a blush which bled
drop by drop to the ground
until a steady rain left
a large red stain beneath
skeletons whose limbs
I could hear clattering,
summoning all souls,
proclaiming all saints,
until children came
to demand their tithe.
Thinking about high school

and reunions in Michigan
reminds me of that unlit stretch of 131
north of Constantine
where semis pass each other going ahead of me
and when they've cleared the oncoming lane
the headlights of the traffic blind me
so a large rural mailbox looming
out of the nightyard on my right
looks like a deer about to leap
in front of my car while I make plans
for an accident where something natural
and something unnatural are about to collide
and I think I have it fixed in my mind
which is which but adrenaline flows
and I'm past and recognizing the box
when I speak sharply to the loud boy
in the back seat.
Head On

Carol was worried about her mother beginning to forget things:
her keys, her purse, her location:
then she heard the radio news mention the possible pact
between several men, very ill,
who climbed into a small plane one day
to crash deliberately, to die. Weeks later
what were her mom and those three bridge club ladies in their eighties thinking
when they left Milford on a sunny,
20° January morning to go to lunch?
All in Millie’s ’86 Caddy, no airplane,
they headed north on State Road 15, discussing
their heart attacks and hip replacements
they navigated Goshen’s snowy streets safely, drove on through Elkhart
not stopping to shop at Walmart or the mall, chatting all the way
about grown children, grandchildren,
their friend Marge in Nappanee,
Betty from Bremen who moved
to Syracuse, their departed husbands, *Bruce was so stupid, James was a gem, a real provider.* These women had traded secrets for begetting, or not, traded *rumtopf* and sourdough starter.
So I wonder whether they had an accident or an agreement when their north-going car met an east-going, left-turning, semi-tractor-with-trailer at a high rate of speed at the accident prone intersection of State Road 15 and SR 20 in Mishawaka or Elkhart. Carol says it’s hard to tell just which South Bend suburb it is right there, where their souls debarked.
Dominion

We swallow spiders in our sleep
a recent survey says; not just one
per year for those of us who slumber
on our backs, mouths open to breathe,
to snore. Why doesn’t the spider suspended
on its silky filament simply haul
itself away from danger? Does the dark,
damp, gaping, human maw tempt,
seem too much like a possible home site,
a place where insects could be trapped
for dinner? When I am awake I don’t find
numerous bugs haunting the neighborhood
of my mouth even, or especially, when it’s open.
What winged members of this food chain
fly by our facial environs in night
while we dream of Venus Fly-traps, or spiders,
which signify pure happiness when
we see them in our night visions,
as if we must imagine arachnids
to balance the high? Don’t look up
at the stippled stucco ceiling; spiders
and their dinner companions hide
behind every little plaster stalactite. Trying
to ignore the threat of inhaled ephemera
I tuck myself in bed, hunt the waffle-weave
thermal blanket from where it retreats
down between sheet and comforter. The comforter,
large, soft-stuffed object which, by multiplying
my own warmth, attempts to compensate
for the lack of other heat, other comfort,
in my four-poster, queen-sized,

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but who can think herself a queen
with no subjects, no king, no consort?
I bury my cold nose under the top edge
of my blankets. This hides my bug-trap
of a mouth but puts me in close proximity
to the sources of dust-mites; my pillow, my mattress.
These tiny millions dine on fallen flakes of flesh,
not allergic to humans the way we can be
allergic to cats even when they play
with spiders – toss them as they would a mouse,
pounce on the disoriented arachnids,
like they toss and hop after those large moths
my grandmother called millers because
they are dusty like the faces and clothes
of mill-hands. Mites would love to sleep
with those guys. But these specks
will be snorted, snuffed up into my sinuses,
make me sneeze, perhaps expel
an errant spider from my throat. What errand
is the eight-legged on, what hunt,
when it lowers itself on its lifeline
to my face? Wouldn’t it benefit
from acquaintance with dust-mites,
the size and numbers of which must be
to the spider as the ocean of plankton
is to the whale? I pray silently, make a vow,
a plan, cast a spell against the multitudes
of minutiae, my only domain.
Sweat

The beekeeper sweats while he works the hive, boxes heavy with wax-filled frames and maybe some honey as he transfers their weight to his legs and lifts them, one for each colony, into place over a metal grid: a queen excluder between lower brood chambers and upper honey harvest boxes. It is almost always a hot time of year to do this, add the double layers of clothing for protection, the heavy shoes and hat and gloves, because bees go for any crevice in the intruder's clothes and then the crease in the neck, behind the ear, or next to the veined nose as if they can smell the sweat emerge from fleshy pores from all the sources of perspiration: muscle strain, stress, fear, and the work of loving the hive, doing what the colony needs, or as if human musk attracts bees.
The Hunt

Nothing was somber about last Saturday when the beekeeper and I walked down the hill to where his jon-boat lay on its side to keep the rain drained out except the frightened charcoal-colored mouse who stared up at us when we tipped the boat upright to install oars and ourselves. He had been rolled on his back with the turn of the boat so we saw his cream underside clean as a white china plate before he twisted and righted himself. His dark tail was half-again as long as his body where every hair was sleek and in place as he stopped still. Long-legged spiders scattered and ran for grass as the beekeeper slid a paddle under the fear-frozen rodent and lifted him into the yard. Placed near the base of a lake willow, the long tail and its owner disappeared in the dapple of the woods beside the channel. I hoped for its life, thought of our black-and-white cat; Katie rarely brings us a mouse among the voles, house finches, and young rabbits she drops on the mat by the back door for our admiring congratulations. She yeows outside until she has our attention, then tosses her catch and jumps at it, re-enacts the hunt. It seems she can't instruct us often enough to make great stalkers of us, and this Saturday when we returned from our row the hind-quarters and lengthy tail were what remained of the gift of a dark gray mouse on the back porch.
Hunting Seasons

As we stop the car abruptly to steal
a look at the flock of turkeys about
to step in our way, they are silk, glimmer
ebony-blue, stand a few yards from this
gravel road, across the ditch among scrub trees
and those low bushes of wild blueberries.
Their fabric shines like iridescent black
feathers, but these birds don’t move, don’t turn
to flee from our halted vehicle where we watch
through the windows, driver and passenger,
husband and wife. He lowers the window
nearest the birds He puts my window down,
they make no sound so he gobbles at them

while I remember visiting Sylvia
when she won a turkey-hunting license
in the state lottery and insisted
on giving me a shooting lesson,
not with her birthday gift, matte-black rifle
just for turkey hunting Shiny objects
frighten them, but with a duck-hunting
video game on the t.v. I surprise myself
and do OK. She says she knew I would.

But today, as he and I search
for a mushroom hunting spot, we hear that
gobble-gobble-gobble nearby, look
to the sound we think another bird,
but see, camouflaged, a small green-and-brown tent,
a blind behind these sightless turkeys.
Deer

A yearling doe patrols
our yard in snow cover. Dawn
to dusk as far as we can tell. She
browses our bulb garden for tulip shoots,
scrapes the snow and myrtle aside
next to the split rail fence; there must be
some green nutritious thing sprouting beneath.
I go out to sing Kitty kitty kitty,
in the way French shop clerks chirp
Bonjour, Madame; Bonjour Monsieur,
and there she stands looking at me
from behind the junipers, below
the bird feeder. She doesn’t even flinch,
so I imagine she has grown up
in our woods, has heard my cat calling
every day of her life, has perhaps seen me
when I didn’t see her as I retrieved
house pets. When snow is very deep
we put hay out to distract the deer
from eating the young red buds
and arbor vitae, and find the bales
also harbor rabbits for the winter;
we sing back to the finches and cardinals
as we fill the feeders. Each evening
we read or doze under the lamplight
while the yellow-and-white kitten runs
quickly to a corner in the kitchen
and listens to an electrical outlet
in the wall outside of which hangs
the porch swing, near the picnic table.
Perhaps the doe shelters on that patio,
or a homeless cat or possum that Fuzz
hears wheezing in the cold night
next to the house. I don’t know
what to sing, what key to use,
to call the deer close enough
to touch more than sight.
Switch

I hear that pop come from under the dash; not the same noise my friend Lynn heard when the deer, the second deer, not the first deer, hit her passenger side front car door and left his rack dangling from the hole he made. She was embarrassed to have to report this second run-in on U.S.33 in six months, but glad to have the antlers to prove it. This pop isn’t that dangerous a sound; then the dash lights go out, all but two, and I think that’s the only problem. An inconvenience in this night-driving thunderstorm until the state trooper pulls me over half an hour later between Wabash and Elwood. Something about Wabash makes me feel violated anyway though it should be Elwood, home of the KKK, that makes me feel that way. I always feel lucky to get through that town. I see flashing lights in my rear-view and check my speed (one of the two lights). I still have plenty of gas. But I feel I am attracting undue attention for I-don’t-know-what reason as the officer walks up to my window during a lull in the storm and asks to see my driver’s license. I dig it out of my wallet before I think to ask Is something wrong? I hope this doesn’t make me late to pick up my son. You have no taillights. Oh. I heard the fuse go just south of Pierceton but I thought it was only the dash lights. I don’t tell him about Lynn’s two deer adventures. He looks like he’s trying to appear authoritative and to be politically correct at the same time. I wonder

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whether he studies this expression in the mirror at home
in the morning before he takes off for work,
maybe after he shaves, before breakfast. I hope
he doesn’t practice this face on his kids. He seems young
so I think he has little kids who would be scared
by this look from their dad. How far you going tonight?
I’m picking my son up in Indianapolis
and going on to Bloomington. He gives me a warning
ticket and tells me to watch for cars coming up behind me,
tap my foot on the brake to show them I’m there,
and show the ticket to any troopers who pull me over
so they don’t give me another for your taillights anyway.
I laugh and thank him and say I’ll change the fuse
when I get to my ex’s. I don’t explain that this is actually
my second ex-husband who I sometimes imagine
glassy-eyed as Lynn’s dazed second deer.
I turn on the dome light and pull away. My son
and I change the fuse a couple of times
in the pouring-down rain before we get the message:
maybe there’s a dead short in the system. My ex
asks me what I’m going to do. I’m not sleeping
at his house tonight. I’ll get my car fixed
when I get back to Kalamazoo.
You can’t do that!
I’ll turn the dome light on. None of us thinks
of the emergency flashers. I don’t remind him
about Lynn’s two deer hits with her brand new
car the year of our first separation. She said the deer
bounded away into the twilight like
the ghost of a deer—any whitetail—
because he was no longer crowned. Gray and I leave.
People on 465 flash their lights, honk and gesture,
sometimes appear to lose control of their own cars
in their efforts to tell us our taillights are out.
Bargain

Browsing the pow-wow, comparing the arts of dream-weavers, I'm on my second round through the booths when I see the catcher hung with hands-full of light brown downy feathers separating royal blue beads, a tiny turquoise woven into the center. Meant to be mine, it is suspended at one end of a long booth but I'm a thorough shopper today; *rooster feathers* the trader from Jemez Pueblo says when I ask whether the shiny, sleek, black quills of the dream-catcher at the other end of his booth are crow. I love the other one but might buy this jet-necklace-colored thing just to own crow-hued feathers or to give a friend. Even I know rooster feathers are not usually for women. My grandfather always said of loud girls, *a whistling woman is like a crowing hen.* The shape and color of these quills say *macho, death,* not *light or life.* I move back to the catcher with a small chartreuse stone caught in its weft. Web trimmed with brown speckled tufts of down from those prairie chickens whose roosters have brilliant yellow-gold feathers on cheeks which they puff up to attract females. Tied up with bouquets of feathers adorned with lucent blue glass beads, it vows to tangle the wings of all my bad dreams. *I'll take this one, please,* I say when he makes his way back to me. I ask the price and the trader points to each of the catchers he has seen me touch, tells me the cost. I do not haggle, but when he asks my name, writes the receipt, he gives me a break anyway, and I whistle on.
Cacophony

The ‘86 Ford Escort wagon stalled at the light at the corner of La Revolución and El Presidente in Tijuana attracts little attention even loaded as it is with six beautiful young Mexican men, each dressed in a ruffled white shirt, an elaborate gold, red, orange, or blue bow at the throat. As the light turns green the Mariachi band, unable to make the car go, disembarks to the delight of the large-beaked Macaw perched on the saddle of the zebra-striped donkey harnessed to the corner photo stand’s cart under a chartreuse and fuchsia sign that says TIJUANA 1999 MEXICO in the shade of two royal palms near where we stand chatting in the sun as crowds of out-of-school local kids and tourists swarm past us; I want you to climb up on the donkey cart, sit under the sign, have your photo taken with me because we see each other so seldom this might be our last act in the century and should be commemorated by something more charming than our full bellies from too many good restaurants in one long weekend in San Diego, but even your visits to apparently poor, crowded, Mexican towns disconcert you. You want no evidence left for posterity so we smile into each other’s eyes and raise our voices in chorus as we avoid eye contact with the proprietor of the Macaw-and-donkey cart while the bird flaps his clipped wings and screams Vámonos! at the boys in tight black pants who scramble from the Escort, push it through the intersection where everything with wheels and horns in the vicinity plays a symphony in cacophony to accompany, deride, encourage, or chide the Mariachis.
Still

Before we went to sleep
he said he didn’t want to go home,
back to Michigan, didn’t believe me
when I said I feel the movement here
all of the time. Black-capped chickadees
and sparrows in their plain brown wrappers,
celebrations of everything dappled,
sweep the crumbs from the tile floor
near the glass hacienda doors
and tidy the palm fronds woven
in the carpet of El Cafe Picante
at a beach formed by a man-made inlet
of the Pacific. Orange Birds-of-Paradise
stick out purple tongues to catch hummingbirds
who flirt with my red shirt. At my table in the sun
of the veranda I write, waiting for him
to join me beneath these shaggy palms.
The waitress is too attentive, doesn’t understand
this pencil-ing person who eats so slowly;
she wants to know the story behind such poor
attention to the melons, strawberries, bananas
and kiwi slices of the heaped fruit plate. Waiting
for a friend. Will be here for a while, I say,
so she assures me I need not feel rushed
and I write about yesterday afternoon in Tijuana
but not last night’s earthquake. I was awake
when the tremors started at almost 3 a.m.;
this morning the T.V. news said seven-point-two
on Cal Tech’s Richter scale, its center
at a small desert town named after a cactus
called Joshua Tree. When the bed’s shaking
awakened him I grabbed his hand to keep him
from getting up, stumbling around
the swaying fifth floor hotel room. I wanted him
to remember he was not alone. As the room rocked
and rolled he said he had changed his mind
because Home, though cold, usually holds still.
Bouquet

The day is completely still until 1:15 when the afternoon breeze tosses the top branches of the eucalyptus trees, then the lower cedars and spruces begin to move. Long, aromatic leaves begin their rustling fall like large raindrops hitting the lawn. The rising wind prompts the limbs and dry leaves to sounds like the lake at Syracuse quietly bumping boats against the docks while little waves lap the stanchions, the uprights, of the piers there. Does the wind excite the coyotes? They begin to call in the foothills further east and all the dogs in the neighborhood yap nervously to each other. The horse down the hill perks her ears and canters around her paddock. Unlike their 1:00 a.m. barking, the peacocks across the dusty gravel lane take no notice. By 2:30 this afternoon honey bees purposefully cruise the herbs and flowers in the border gardens as Sam, the resident marmalade tabby, dozes on the shaded grass beneath my lawn chair keeping company on El Cajon.
The beekeeper’s wife visits the art institute where she looks at a painting of Miss Cassatt whose blue dress, edged with multi-colored embroidery, in its brightness and impressionistic detail is the most present object in the painting. Her red sash is a nice contrast with her frock and the azure lacy shawl she works at with her brass hued crochet hook. The fichu is for Corabella, Elsie’s cherished doll. Her niece asked her to make something of two handfuls of nearly crushed pink rose petals, but Lydia declined, explained their fragile nature and volunteered this marine blue cotton yarn for the doll’s covering. In this painting Miss Cassatt is even more pallid than that porcelain plaything: her face a near transparency, as if she disappears as Mary paints her. Her white lace bonnet is imbued with those pinkish highlights May uses to soften the evanescing of white on even a healthy complexion. Perhaps it is just the effect of the shade cast upon her face beneath the hat, but even her tea-with-milk colored gloves, the backs of which she has carefully embroidered with three bright red lines, are not so pale. May records this detail as she captures the contemplative soul buried within these clothes, fading in this face. Were those gloves worn by living hands, or is that an illusion? Is her ashen face all that is left of Lydia?

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In my dreams of the Cassatt exhibit
Lydia Cassatt escapes her illness and obligation
to sit for her sister as iron rails soften into song.
How to stay awake, go on? There is always thirst:
that train taking her in search of dreamed water.
Her knitting needles counterpoint the click, clack
of the rail carriage wheels through the dry country
outside Madrid where there is only economy;
grandmothers sweep the streets so clean
there is little for a pigeon to glean, few birds
for cats to stalk. Her fingers work the yarn
in syncopated rhythm to the sway of the train
all the way to central Italy where, in the courtyards
of Arrezzo, large clay pots with spiral floors,
and small holes for air and light along their sides,
house herds of dormice saved from felines.
These mice are fed as much as they can eat, fattened
for human fodder, eaten roasted and dipped in honey
and sesame seeds. Tracking the coast she chooses
Mediterranean blue yarn for the next section
until she arrives in Venice where there is one
herring gull which hunts and kills three or four
pigeons a day, better than the thousands
of wild tabbies in the city of canals can do.
Back on the train she tries to crochet an afghan
with perfect vanished seams the way DNA
and genes knit a seamless convoluted brain,
the way memory needles a life into what we want
to have happened; not leaving out events but hiding
some in folds and seams invisibly. Not biography,
or portraiture, but that subjective story:
the way a dove looks like part of the sculpture
as it hangs its head over the small spigot of a fountain,
then it moves to touch beak to water.
Why do the black-necked cranes of Bhutan mate for life when that could be eighty years? What do the younger Buddhist monks think as they hang from the open temple windows beneath the overhang of the red tile roof to watch the cloud of cranes circle them thrice on their return in Spring? Do the healers among the monks contemplate their late summer harvest of flowering remedies on the rocky slopes? Or do they entertain themselves with thoughts of the hornbills who mud their mates into the hollow of a tree trunk during nesting season? Why do Buddhists think these birds an example of gracious selflessness? Does the hornbill's mate appreciate his flight from tree to tree testing fruit for ripeness with his huge beak gently? Does he hear her knocking her beak against the narrow mud opening in her hideaway? Does the snow-leopard hear, she who is no longer white at this time of year? Does the sound distract her from her hunt of goat antelope kids? Do the golden langurs born for the monkey-life in the deepest-green-top-most canopy take note? Would they come down to earth if they did? From their home can they see eagles and vultures dropping the largest bones on stones to break and spill their marrow? Would we give our corpses to the monks to be dismembered and laid generously on a rocky outcropping mountainside, to feed the birds? For sky burial?
Revision

That dead beagle lying in the gravel beside the railroad crossing as my car tops the rise over the tracks distracts me from the sign I see each morning on the way to a job where I am no more, or less secure than any other woman who sells her time. It says TRAINS DON'T WHISTLE in concert with the anti-noise ordinance in Elkhart, Indiana, where we don't want to frighten the horses pulling Amish buggies, but I don't see it today because I look at the dog and wish for crows, buzzards, remember domesticity. I want that carcass recycled immediately by carrion eaters in the Buddhist way, not the way we recycle cans and bottles, paper and plastic. Not dead stuff into more dead stuff but the way flesh feeds flesh, the living eat the recently live to keep life in themselves. Remember domesticity; an elderly couple caught at the other side of the crossing, unable to see what I see, waits for the train to pass and revise the search for their dog.
I lie in the tunnel of the magnetic resonance imaging machine, the sting
of a generated breeze on my tongue, the scales
of rock music in my ears as well as the pounding of low “C”
notes. The machine prepares its resounding vibration. It pivots,
revolves around my prone self. *Lie perfectly still*, the attendant seems to wheeze.
Perhaps he, too, is allergic to autumnal fungi or yellowing birch
leaves. I am nervous, resistant, but don’t need the whip of a birch
branch to convince me of this test. The suggestion, the scent, the sting
of potential disease or nerve damage is enough to keep me from weaseling
out of this day’s exam. I hadn’t reckoned with noise, the scale
monotonous, reverberating. I close my eyes against the dim lights – a pivotal
thought thinks me out of here, perhaps to Heaney’s Irish sea
coast, where the rye waves in the breeze again. I can almost see
the green, smell it, but I am tired and my mind turns to the white birch’s
delicate branch and foliage, an equal beauty, leaves pivoting
in the moving air. All its image behind my eyelids relieves stress even as stinging
memory of last evening’s leaf smoke reminds me of the season, the scale
of color of soon to be empty trees. How the squirrels, raccoons, weasels
dig in for the coming cold the way I am in this bunker like the weasel’s
burrow only better lit, ventilated. I wish I could see
a dozen white tulips and hear my daughter’s violin singing its scales
practiced in our living room for years but the MRI sounding and the birch
of my imagination are interference, seduction. The smell, stinging,
of paper-whites and allergy in my nose creates a spasm – my body pivots,
contorts slightly. The winter of the chile ristra hung from a pivotal
pot hook on the ceiling rack in my kitchen made my eyes burn, lungs wheeze
until I discovered the problem of the dried chiles and carried the string
out to the back porch, opened doors and windows for a sea-
change. At the following year’s end it was the paper-whites in a birch-
stump planter which caused the allergic bronchitis on a grand scale.

*continued/stanza break*
Now the MRI is louder, sound and rhythm suitable for "La Scala" in a much larger venue than this body-sized niche with its pivoting image-making electro-magnets. It imprints the details of my spine on film like birch bark in its delicacy and contrast while I concentrate not to wheeze with asthma – no panic here – no fear of small places, screams in the higher notes of "C" as I think of a way to reward my own good behavior later … perhaps a stringer of trout for breakfast, though a campfire, too, can make me wheeze. What could be important, even pivotal, would be a trip to the sea, west coast, my sister's house, no birches, but in her yard eucalyptus odor stings.
Patience

When Tillie leaves the kitchen, Karl, where he sits at the table finishing his supper, confides to his daughter-in-law, The woman who lives here is stealing his railroad checks. He wants to go home to his momma in his dementia. She misses the flirt of his calling her Honey Bunch, saying it's about time his son had some happiness in his life. Karl was a compulsive mower, plower of snow and spring garden, a man of quick runs to town in his pick-up, a honker of the car horn when not quite waiting for Tillie to go to church. Then he saw lions in the fields, plowed his cane under with the corn stalks, escaped the house to walk their rural road in the dead of night, Someone's at the door. Someone needs help. Someone's here to rob us. After the tiny strokes give way to a massive one, and heart attack, he lies, taking his time dying among the electrodes, the tubing and machinery of the intensive care ward. His young nurse wakes the son and his wife where they sleep on the couches of a waiting-room, It's time; the end is very close, and they walk down the hall to hold his hand, say goodbye yet again. The daughter-in-law leans, whispers in his ear, It's OK. It's time to go home to Momma. He sighs; his rigid form relaxes and he is gone.
Internal Bleeding

Those ovoid fuzzy green containers which are poppy buds filled with wrinkled red petals, the way something green bleeds inwardly, the outward green of rhubarb which is red and tart inside, the way everything feminine bleeds, sometimes with the sweetness of Sangria, a drink for fiestas, or the thirty gallon galvanized tin livestock watering tub full of red wine, fruit juice, and ice I mixed up for friends Memorial Day weekend, 1973, when my twenty-two month-old daughter made an afternoon's adventure of finishing off what was left in the bottoms of plastic glasses. So I put her to bed in her crib, drunk. Last winter I lost something in a beat up old two-toned cranberry pick-up so for months every red truck and certain shades of sunlit brown attract my sight. I read the personals because what can be found there is the difference between men and women; who they think they are, who they want. My heart is a pocket with a hole in it. All the doctors say they hear the murmur, ask me whether I'm often out of breath. Of course, but I don't want tests, I'm not ready for stitches to fix what works. I have not found a heart- or pocket-shaped herb to cure this internal flow and shush-hush, this fissure only men fall through.
For Lilacs

For more than twenty years I could say my lilac bush, my garden. Should have said our yard, our house, because we were, and knew why we were, there for many of those days, hours. Like the trumpet vine in our back yard, green shoots springing up through the grass, no boundaries, no guards at the borders could stop its keen urge to proliferate. Our corollary drive to multiply brought forth our daughter, dark eyed, brunette sprite, uncontainable, born weeks before her time, a new Otter for my great-grandmother; unrestrainable, when she could walk she ran for the front door, outside, purple lilacs she couldn’t ignore.

For over twenty years I could say my lilac bush, my rambling rose, my hybrids, even that spring of the prom-weekend, sky-filling snow, covering blooms, quieting katydids. It made the world pastel, paled green grass and purple lilacs with a thick white veil, subdued sounds around the neighborhood as gowns were pressed, attention paid to details; corsages, boutonnieres, reservations for dinner. Parent-photographers shot too many pictures, no revelations in these scenes, no news, just forget-me-nots in bloom again, teens trying to grow up, my oldest daughter putting on make-up.

For something near twenty years our lilac bush stood guard over the sand box, swing set. stood between our children, grassy back-

continued / no stanza break

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For Lilacs

yard, and the lake, where our babies were not yet ready to swim without the company of watchful parents, could not go fishing without someone to bait their hooks. Any sunny day was good for childish wishing to go to the park, Mom, go swimming, Mom, and off we would go trailing our three cats, black cocker spaniel, beach towels, floating flotsam in the forms of toys, fishing gear, worms, hats to keep the sun from burning those young faces while children played, wove their snake-grass necklaces.

Since long before we bought this house, this half acre surrounded on three sides by the maple-lined village streets, the nine foot height and seven foot width of lilac bush stood guard, anchored the yard, was the corner post and foundation of a living u-shaped hedge of rose ramblers, trumpet vine, rose of Sharon, yucca, and hundreds of grape hyacinths in spring. The purple lilac stood between the sandbox, swing set, and Front Street, Syracuse Lake. The bush and hedge sheltered rabbits, robins, and springtime duck nests. Easter eggs were sometimes found there and even on rainy days our children dragged picnic blankets under the branches in lieu of a tree house. Each Mother’s Day we watched for the mother duck parade as from hidden nests the Mallards led early new-hatched ducklings from under hedges, and out of basement window-wells, across Front Street to their first swim practice, in training for independence.
Three Bees

These could be any kind of bees
or hornets, I can’t differentiate.
For each of three days in a row
I find one bee on the lace curtains
of my balcony window: one of those
large, glass, sliding doors. Each day
I wonder how the stinging winged bits
of saffron got in my apartment. I think
I let them in when I go out to water
the potted plants which are my garden.
I could think of them as individual
buzzing furies but to what effect?
What’s one mythological fury compared
to the hordes of worries of being a parent,
a grandparent? What’s one bee clinging
to the window side of the lace where
I can just open the screen door and
let it fly? How does that compare
to parenting a bi-polar daughter?
And the next day a new bee
which I carefully encourage out the door
compares in what way to my daughter’s
three year old son raising himself?
The following afternoon’s warning drone
at the window-door does not add to,
or subtract from, receiving no phone calls
from a grown child so sick she usually
phones daily to ask whether she can shower
now, what dish might she take to a picnic,
what should she wear to work,
will I talk her through her son’s
supper, bath, bedtime?
Light at Dusk

Not concerned with reflection or refraction
but the intensity of color just at dusk
or after the refreshment of an afternoon rain
before the sun returns full strength
when grass and trees are at their greenest
in spring, before they have gathered that dust
which doesn't wash off in summer,
no dried brown edges, but greenest green
to every perimeter, maple leaf, oak,
pointed tulip spikes, grass blade after blade.
In this light daffodils and grape hyacinth
are yellowest and purpest before they fade
and are mowed, tulips are whitest, reds
are deepest while children's voices carry
clearest and farthest in the remnant humidity.
In this reflection I hear my grandson's voice
as he says his name, Guthrie, or mine, Grandma,
and makes them the same sound the way he makes
Morgan, his aunt, my daughter, and water sound
alike; one refreshes with humor, the other
with elemental chemistry, both necessary
to his world as he runs the length
of deepest green garden, arms waving
as if to take flight, to lighten the dusk.
MOTHERS OF US ALL: WHEN DOES POLITICAL MESSAGE
TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER ART IN SOME MODERN
AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S POETRY

“... beautiful Muriel, mother of everyone,” was what Anne Sexton called her
(Zawinski 1). Sexton, as did Adrienne Rich, felt the ancestral presence of Muriel Rukeyser
as a ground breaker for all women writing after her. When we look for a reference about
Rukeyser we find her included not among the so-called confessional poets, where many
contemporary writers are lumped together, but in the sections referring to the women’s
movement. This is because, as the critic Louise Kertesz notes, “‘No woman poet makes
the successful fusion of personal and social themes in a modern prosody before Rukeyser’”
(Rich xi). Even more than for her poetry during her lifetime, Rukeyser was considered an
intellectual for her political participation in, and observation of, major events in her
lifetime such as the case of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama, the People’s Olympiad in
Spain as the Spanish Civil War began, the silicosis cases in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia,
and the Vietnam War. All of this political activity on her part fed the writing of her
poems. In addition to her political witnessing and ground breaking writing, Rukeyser was
a single mother when to be so was socially unacceptable.

Rukeyser’s poems “celebrate the lives of women as artists, as workers, as political
activists, as mothers and daughters and wives” (Myers 224). She did not write a “purely
‘feminine’ poetry” however. She broke away from nineteenth century traditions and
expectations of women’s verse, including subject matter, form and language, which were
still prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century. Willard Mass observed of her work that “Rukeyser’s approach was ‘fresh and vital, and her poems happily lack the restricted metaphysical concern with a feminine world decorated with trees and flowers and inhabited by birds on wing – a characteristic peculiar to the verse of women of the last decade’” (Myers 225). What allows us to think of her as “the mother of us all” is “her adamant refusal to relinquish any part of her femaleness even as she repudiated society’s ideas about what females were and what they should do” (Myers 225). Rukeyser did not aspire to be equal to a man because she “had a strong and innate sense of the power and worth of women” (Myers 225).

Rooted in her sense of the innate worth of women and what they offer to the world is her eschewing of, or improvisation on, historic poetic forms, and her adoption of a more organic form of her own. She created “an idiosyncratic system of spacing and punctuation that she absolutely insisted upon” and which confounded editors and typesetters for whom she had to resort to a rubber stamp for her manuscripts that read “PLEASE BELIEVE THE PUNCTUATION” (Myers 226). She was attempting a nonlinear, inclusive verse form that could recreate “some of the physical imperatives that lay at the base of her own urge to poetic expression and that related to the gender-specific nature of her life as a woman. ‘I write from the body, a female body,’ she often said” (Myers 226). She wrote sprawling poems, often listing and cataloging in the tradition of Walt Whitman.

Kate Daniels lists several themes and subjects that characterize Rukeyser’s work. “These include the pain of a lost female history and subsequent efforts to retrieve and articulate it; the documentation of gender-specific female experience; the celebration and affirmation of a new woman-identified consciousness; a strong impulse toward pacifism
and nonviolence that is explicitly related to the life-giving powers of the female; and the exploration of androgyny” (Myers 227). I believe it is Rukeyser’s concern with gender-specific female experience which Anne Sexton found nurturing in this “mother of us all.” While she was able to affirm her femaleness, Sexton seemed to find it more difficult to celebrate a woman-identified consciousness. Although Sexton could and often did celebrate her body, her children, and “the fiercely joyous side of a turbulent emotional life,” for her, life as a woman was not always a party (Myers 197). She seemed, much more than Rukeyser, to feel confined within her body and within her female identity. Rukeyser wrote about pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation, sex and desire, nursing, masturbation and orgasm but she also wrote to take women “beyond the nursery worlds and ‘interminable girlhoods’ they have historically inhabited” (Myers 228). In her poem “Käthe Kollwitz” Rukeyser writes “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open” (Rukeyser 217).

While Sexton also wrote about “the physical life of the body, the pull between the biological life and the mental life, the trickeries of love, the awesome or tyrannical presence of children and the disturbing power still exerted by deceased parents,” as well as her attraction to death, Sexton’s poetry “conveys the tremendous pressure of an inner reality demanding expression” (Myers 196). Rukeyser’s work is much more about the political, social, cultural realities and possibilities of womanhood, while Sexton’s work is more concerned with the mental, emotional and intellectual inner life of the woman which she feels free to discuss because of the presence of ground breakers like Rukeyser. Another way to look at what these two writers have in common is that they both write the
poetry of witness. They witness their times, and the public and private events and matters of those times.

It is the project of both Rukeyser and Sexton to write the truth of a woman's life but Sexton writes in "The Black Art," "With used furniture he makes a tree. / A writer is essentially a crook" (Sexton 88), while Rukeyser's work is much more that of "a combination of love and invention" (Levi xvii), as she writes in "The Overthrow of One O'Clock At Night," "Trust in experience. And in the rhythms. / The deep rhythms of your experience" (Rukeyser 213). As Maxine Kumin wrote, "... the contemporary poem is informed by a consciousness of the milieu that shapes it. It cannot be otherwise in this complicated age where we must confront the urgent possibility of holocaust by bomb, nerve gas, anthrax or other agent... But the driving force of the poem, the direction the poet takes is an internal matter" (Kumin 174-175). I take this to mean that each poet has her own creative urge which necessarily springs from the culture in which she is nurtured, or perhaps is not nurtured, but exists.

Sexton had the hubris to follow in Rukeyser's footsteps and even elaborate on Rukeyser's body-centered material and this affronted male critics of her time. For example, Louis Simpson, wrote in Harper's Magazine that "Menstruation at Forty' was 'the straw that broke this camel's back'" and James Dickey, who wrote Deliverance, critiqued All My Pretty Ones saying "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience..." (How It Was xx). Perhaps it was her flamboyance on the stage that upset them. Sexton used props including the water glass, cigarettes and ashtray. "She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudoshouts to calculated effect" and later she used a back-up band during her
readings (How It Was xxi). Sexton's best friend Maxine Kumin writes "But behind the
glamorously garbed woman lurked a terrified and homely child, cowed from the cradle
onward, it seemed, by the indifferences and cruelties of her world" (How It Was xxix-xxii).

While Sexton admired Rukeyser as "mother of everyone," Rukeyser said of
Sexton's poem "In Celebration of My Uterus" that it is "one of the few poems in which a
woman has come to the fact as symbol, the center after many years of silence and taboo"
(How It Was xxi). Kumin wrote of Sexton that she "delineated the problematic position of
women – the neurotic reality of the time..." (How It Was xxxiv). In other words, for
Rukeyser, the political was personal, and, for Sexton, the personal was political. For these
two artists both issues must be expressed in their writing and this is the interconnection of
poetics and politics in their work.

As an example of the celebratory in Sexton's poems, "In Celebration of My Uterus" is certainly notable. The poem begins with the lines "Everyone in me is a bird. / I
am beating all my wings." This is Sexton's way of expressing great relief and happiness
that her uterus is not going to be removed because "They wanted to cut you out / but they
will not." "They" are further described as saying the uterus was "immeasurably empty"
and "sick unto dying" but Sexton refutes these statements with "they were wrong. / You
are singing like a school girl. / You are not torn." Here is a uterus singing like a school
girl, joyfully and even hopefully, but definitely not unhealthy or injured and needing to be
removed. Beginning in the tenth line Sexton addresses her uterus as

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.
Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.
Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.
Hello to the soil of the fields.
Welcome, roots.

Here is her return to the celebration of life in the form of her uterus which is an example of her inner spirit, a complete, undamaged cup with a cover which keeps its contents contained. She relates the uterus to all earthly means of production including the soil of the fields with its maze of roots (Sexton 181-182).

This singing is a slight salute toward Walt Whitman, and the third stanza of this poem celebrates the expansiveness and all-inclusiveness of Whitman as well as extending Rukeyser’s subject matter of the fitness of certain activities and occupations for women. In this stanza “Any person, any commonwealth would say of it, / “It is good this year that we may plant again / and think forward to a harvest.” This is a bold statement of the value and usefulness of her uterus which is followed by a list of all the women who are “singing of this:” and celebrating with her, including a factory worker, an aquarium worker, a woman driving her Ford, a toll gate worker, a rancher in Arizona, a cello player in Russia, a woman cooking in Egypt, a woman painting her bedroom, a dying woman, a Thai woman, a mother, a woman on a train, “... although some can not / sing a note.” Here Sexton emphasizes those who “can not” sing a note by leaving a space in what would normally be a combined or contracted word “cannot” or “can’t.” The reader can almost hear the voice of Sexton’s reproving mother, or perhaps a slight criticism of Whitman’s voice in that moment in the poem (Sexton 182).

In the final stanza of this poem Sexton writes another list in the tradition of Whitman, once again addressing her uterus as “Sweet weight, / in celebration of the
woman I am / let me carry a ten-foot scarf,” and cataloging the occupations she might be
allowed to undertake including drummer, usher, pathologist, astronomer, sucker of flower
stems (as Whitman was a sucker of grass stems), carver of tribal figures. Each of these is a
possibility as she writes “(if that is my part)” which is a moment of uncertainty or
acceptance that her work may be other than what she imagines here. Sexton concludes
“For this thing the body needs / let me sing / for the supper, / for the kissing, / for the
correct / yes.” She is willing to work at whatever is necessary to keep her uterus, singing
for its supper, and also working for the courtship and marriage or “correct yes” that puts
her uterus in production and saves it from the scalpel (Sexton 183). In this poem Sexton
makes a congress of the wombs of all women in the same way that Whitman makes his
concerns the concerns of all humankind and the concerns of all humankind his own.
Sexton’s work is a celebration of a new kind of “body politic.”
Rukeyser also tackled the issue of the uterus but this was the loss of her uterus in a
hysterectomy at the birth of her son. At first this issue was masked in her poem “Orpheus”
in which she writes “Only there is a wound that cries all night. / We have not yet come
through. It cries Speak, it cries Turn. // Majesty, lifted omen. The power to make. / . .
. There is only life. To live is to create. / . . . the dark. The dark. But I will know
again, / woman and man.” (Out of Silence 109). The “wound that cries all night” might be
read either as her son having been born or the wound of the hysterectomy and the mother
crying at her loss. Perhaps mother and child had not yet come through the night or the
surgical removal of her uterus after his birth. The baby’s crying asks the mother to speak
to him, to turn to and comfort him, the newborn who is the “Majesty, the lifted omen.”
The narrator goes on to accept that “There is only life” and “To live is to create.” This is
a statement both of what is left and what is lost to the woman: life is left and life is to create. She will live and not procreate, but create poems. Life has become dark for her but she is aware of her ensuing recovery in “But I will know again.” All of this is said in obscurely metaphorical terms but later in her career, Rukeyser revisits the poem and the occasion in “The Poem as Mask” with the subtitle Orpheus.

In “The Poem as Mask” Rukeyser makes direct reference to her previous “Orpheus” in the subtitle as well as in the very first lines:

When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness, it was a mask,
on their mountain, gold-hunting, singing, in orgy,

it was a mask; when I wrote of the god, fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone down with song,

it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself (Rukeyser 213).

Rukeyser not only refers to the previous work; she gives us the key to the obscuring metaphor she used to tell her story, but she still does not use the word hysterectomy or even uterus. Instead she is “split open” which is literal enough if we know what the subject is. It is left for Sexton to actually use that explicit language and break ground further.

Rukeyser writes that she was “unable to speak” and although the surgery itself may have left her speechless for a while, she was anesthetized during the birth of her son and was not asked for her permission to remove her uterus. The shock of that event must surely have left her speechless, angry and grieving, or “in exile from” herself.
In the second stanza of this poem Rukeyser personalizes the “Orpheus” poem further:

There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory of my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the rescued child beside me among the doctors, and a word of rescue from the great eyes (Rukeyser 213).

She tells us what is metaphor and what is real for her. She reclaims the memory of the birth and the surgery. Accepts the “rescued child” as the fruits of the surgery, or since the line is “... my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the rescued child” perhaps she is a rescued child as well. In addition there is “a word / of rescue from the great eyes.” This might be a symbol of herself being rescued or comforted by her newborn son, or possibly a symbol of the comfort received from the doctors.

For critics the punch line of this poem is the one-line third stanza: “No more masks! No more mythologies!” (Rukeyser 213). This is Rukeyser’s declaration of independence or liberation from the use of completely obscure metaphorical language in her poems. It was also permission for all women after her to tell the truth even though Jan Heller Levi writes of Rukeyser, “If Muriel Rukeyser doesn’t ‘tell all’ (though it could be argued that she does, like Emily Dickinson, ‘tell it slant’), what she does magnificently is offer a radical invitation: to journey alongside one woman as she goes searching and searching” (Levi xix). I believe that Anne Sexton extends the same invitation to her readers and she uses more explicit language to do so.

Rukeyser’s conclusion to “The Poem as Mask” is written: “Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand, / the fragments join in me with their own music” (Rukeyser 213).
Orpheus raises his hand to direct it and his music causes the fragments of memory and language to come together into Rukeyser's poem to make her "own music."

Furthering Rukeyser's project of making a living political statement, Florence Howe and Ellen Bass took the phrase No More Masks! for the title of their groundbreaking anthology of contemporary women's poetry published in the 1970's in the same way that Louise Bernikov used the phrase The World Split Open from "Käthe Kollwitz" as the title for her anthology of contemporary women's poetry which was also published in the 1970's (Levi xviii).

Sexton's controversial "Menstruation at Forty" is yet another take on the womb, but the womb that is "not a clock / nor a bell tolling," which is to say an undependable womb. Just when she believes she might be pregnant with the son she was thinking of, her period starts and she is "two days gone with blood." In this poem Sexton predicts "My death from the wrists, / two name tags, / blood worn like a corsage / to bloom / one on the left and one on the right--" (Sexton 137-138). She knows this because it is her intention. She has a possessive attitude toward this might-have-been son, child "of the genitals I feared," in the last lines of the poem: "I would have possessed you before all women, / calling your name, / calling you mine"(Sexton 138).

In poems both Rukeyser and Sexton have tackled the issue of being thought violent or evil because of what they were willing to write. In "Her Kind" Sexton embraces the thought of being a witch writing:

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I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
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lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind” (Sexton 15).

Here is a woman possessed, flying over suburbia, physically disfigured, as if her internal workings could be manifested in her fingers the way six-toed cats are considered to be brighter than the ordinary sort, out of her mind. To the narrator this renders her not quite a woman, although we might have considered a woman who has twelve fingers and flies to be more than a woman. This is Sexton’s glass: half empty instead of half full. She has tried to fill the glass:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind (Sexton 16).

Shades of Snow White in a woodsy hut cooking for worms and elves, the narrator fills her “cave” with sophisticated things like carvings and silks and cooks for husband and children. While she does this she is whining, rearranging the disaligned, which I understand to be writing poems as her complaint and her effort to realign her world into something more pleasing.

The poem concludes:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor

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where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind (Sexton 16).

This stanza contains the image of a mad-woman being hauled in a cart waving her arms. The narrator seems to be addressing the cart driver as a survivor whose flames she can still feel on her thigh. Does this mean that she has been rescued from the fire, or that she is being driven into the fire, or with the fire? Her ribs crack under the wheels somehow, and it seems that sense is somewhat obscured in these lines in order to preserve the rhyme scheme. Even this serves the poem and narrator as she embraces death as an act of bravery in the penultimate line; the poem disintegrates as the narrator’s sanity appears to decline.

Rukeyser identifies herself as a violent woman in “Waking this Morning.” The title of the poem might be a pun on “waking” as awakening and mourning. It begins, “Waking this morning, / a violent woman in the violent day / Laughing” (Rukeyser 251). The narrator identifies herself with her times or declares herself equal to her era. She awakes laughing, ready to meet the challenges of her epoch. The violent woman in this poem lives in a more closely personalized world:

Past the line of memory
along the long body of your life
in which move childhood, youth, your lifetime of touch,
eyes, lips, chest, belly, sex, legs, to the waves of the sheet.

I look past the little plant
On the city windowsill
to the tall towers bookshaped, crushed together in greed,
the intricate harbor and the sea, the wars, the moon, the
planets, all who people space

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in the sun visible invisible.
African violets in the light
breathing, in a breathing universe. I want strong peace, and
delight,
the wild good.
I want to make my touch poems:
to find my morning, to find you entire
alive moving among the anti-touch people (Rukeyser 251).

The narrator speaks of laughing past the line of memory of “your” life so we wonder
whether she means the life of a second occupant of the bed she awakens in or whether she
is speaking of her own “lifetime of touch.” Informed by the intent in the last lines of this
stanza to “find you entire / alive moving among the anti-touch people, it seems that the
narrator is addressing her remarks to another person. She describes looking out a city
window across the cityscape where tall buildings are “crushed together in greed” on the
banks of a contaminated river, seeing everything in the world and in space, and back to the
violet on the window sill. All-seeing, the narrator declares her desire for a strong peace,
which statement is reminiscent of the rhetoric of the Viet Nam war, the Gulf War and the
wars we are currently engaged in. She also wants delight; she wants her “day”
to dawn and the freedom to make her poems. She wishes to find someone whole “moving
among the anti-touch people” who may be those who criticize her poems for their explicit
language and intentions.

“Waking This Morning” concludes:

I say across the waves of the air to you:
today once more
I will try to be non-violent
one more day
this morning, waking the world away
in the violent day (Rukeyser 251).
The narrator is talking across the air-waves, perhaps on the telephone or a radio, promising someone that she will try to be non-violent this one more day. She is, however, waking the world away, which I take to mean she is mourning the world in these violent times. These lines are harder to understand as meaning she is awakening the violent world away, or awakening to this world, but these are alternative readings.

As self-commentary, these two poems point up the tonal differences in these two pioneering writers. Sexton embraces the idea of dying as an act one is not ashamed of, especially if one is a witch of some sort, who is an odd woman at best, and especially if this is also a role she avails herself of. While doing this she holds her world at arm’s length, although she names the others who live in her world: the worms, elves and driver. Rukeyser embraces her world, as well as the idea of living as witness in the face of the violent realm she finds herself waking in. She does not name the other occupant of this world except to say “you” (and to name the African violet on the window sill). Rukeyser’s up to the challenge of living to cement her position in her world, while Sexton is up to the challenge of dying to the same end.

Sexton initiated an interesting project when in Transformations she updated some classic fairy tales in contemporary language. These are an intriguing and cohesive group of poems of social commentary. An example from this project is “Red Riding Hood” in which little Red Riding Hood is given a red cape by her grandmother. The cape is “her Linus blanket” or security blanket, red as a Swiss flag. “Red’s” mother gives her a basket of wine and cake to take to her sick grandmother and Sexton questions this asking “Where’s the aspirin? The penicillin? / Where’s the fruit juice? / Peter Rabbit got camomile tea” (Sexton 270). When Red Riding Hood met the wolf in the woods she thought him
“no more dangerous / than a streetcar or a panhandler.” After the wolf ate Grandmother and Red Riding Hood “He appeared to be in his ninth month / and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother / rode like two Jonahs up and down with / his every breath.” A hunter came along and gave the wolf “a kind of caesarian section” to save Grandmother and Red Riding Hood. As Red Riding Hood and Grandmother ate the wine and cake next to the wolf’s corpse they suffered short term memory loss “Those two remembering / nothing naked and brutal / from that little death, / that little birth, / from their going down / and their lifting up” (Sexton 272). This conclusion is fascinating with its allusion to the little death or orgasm, and subsequent little birth.

Before Sexton wrote of those fairy tale transformations she wrote of Sylvia Plath’s transformation from living to dead in “Sylvia’s Death:”

Thief! –
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
the one we talked of so often each time
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,
the death that talked of analysts and cures,
the death that talked like brides with plots,
the death we drank to,
the motives and then the quiet deed? (Sexton 126-127)
This seems to be a death that Sexton feels Plath stole from her somehow. Did Plath steal her thunder? Or did she simply get to a peaceful slumber before Sexton? I want to believe it is the latter. It was still socially unacceptable to speak of one’s suicidal thoughts in the sixties when Sexton was writing this poem. She tackles the subject, however, as if discussing it over the back fence, complaining “Thief!” to the friend who usurped her moment in the limelight, or stepped on her lines. Both women attempted suicide several times before they each finally found the quiet moment when no one was looking, no one in attendance to prevent them or save them from the attempt. This excerpt from “Sylvia’s Death” makes it seem as though Plath and Sexton had plotted their exits over drinks regularly, as if they had a pact or a plan, these brides of death. Certainly Plath put her plan in action before Sexton, who held out for eleven more years.

Although Rukeyser was much older than Sexton she lived six years past Sexton’s suicide. Rukeyser was witnessing the incarceration of the poet Kin Chi Ha in China and writing the sequence of poems called “The Gates” when she heard of Sexton’s suicide. In Section 14 she writes:

So I became very dark very large
a silent woman this time given to speech
a woman of the river of that song
and on the beach of the world in storm given
in long lightning seeing the rhyming of those scenes
that make our lives.
Anne Sexton the poet saying
ten days ago to the receptive friend,
the friend of the hand-held camera:
“Muriel is serene.”
Am I that in their sight?
Word comes today of Anne’s
of Anne's long-approaching
of Anne's over-riding over-falling
suicide. Speak for sing for pray for
everyone in solitary
every living life (Rukeyser 264-265).

Rukeyser seems to equate Sexton's death with that of the Chinese poet outside of whose house Rukeyser stood, in the rain and mud, at the gates. She adds Sexton's death to those of everyone in solitary. As Sexton was confined repeatedly because of her mental illness, so other hapless poets are confined for various reasons, including incurring the wrath of the state. These confinements of minds that long to be free lead to their ultimate deaths whether murderously, suicidally, or otherwise.

Written in 1963, the year of Sylvia Plath's suicide, Rukeyser's "The Power of Suicide" is her declaration of life in the face of death:

The potflower on the windowsill says to me
In words that are green-edged red leaves:
Flower flower flower flower
Today for the sake of all the dead Burst into flower (Out of Silence 126).

Her potted flower tells her to bloom in the face of death, for the sake of the dead, in their memory and filling the empty place left by their deaths. It seems that both the death of Plath and the death of Sexton caused Rukeyser to look inward to life, and outward in prayer, for all the living in the case of her lines about Sexton's death, and for all the dead in the case of these lines.

Some of Rukeyser's last words on the subject of death are the following:
Then

*When I am dead, even then,*
*I will still love you, I will wait in these poems,*
*When I am dead, even then*
*I am still listening to you.*
*I will still be making poems for you*
*out of silence;*
*silence will be falling into that silence,*
*it is building music* (Rukeyser 285).

Even though Rukeyser considered herself to be an inadequate communicator with those she was closest to, she promises to be listening even after death in order to continue to witness for those whose lives she loves (Rukeyser 285).

In her last poems Sexton imagines herself going down in flames emotionally and physically. To quote the first stanza and part of the second stanza of "Love Letter Written In A Burning Building;"

Dearest Foxxy,
I am in a crate,
the crate that was ours,
full of white shirts and salad greens,
the icebox knocking at our delectable knocks,
and I wore movies in my eyes,
and you wore eggs in your tunnel,
and we played sheets, sheets, sheets,
all day, even in the bathtub like lunatics.
But today I set the bed afire
and smoke is filling the room,
it is getting hot enough for the walls to melt,
and the icebox, a gluey white tooth.

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I have on a mask in order to write my last words, 
and they are just for you, and I will place them 
in the icebox saved for vodka and tomatoes, 
and perhaps they will last (Sexton 613-614).

No less than Rukeyser, Sexton’s last thoughts included those of the immortality of the written word. Sexton’s vision was skewed by her urge to self-annihilation, however. Like Plath, she dies to make a statement, and, in the same way, Rukeyser lives to make a statement.

Where Rukeyser would, early in her writing career, occasionally sacrifice her message to preserve whatever form she was aiming for, Sexton rarely made that compromise. I believe they learned from each other, Rukeyser freeing Sexton from formal constraints and stereotypically female subject matter, and Sexton freeing Rukeyser from restrained or even obscuring language. Sexton learned from “the Mother of everyone” that she could be a parent and a writer even though it was a struggle to combine those two careers, and she also learned that form and language were hers to reshape and utilize for her own artistic and political purposes. Like Rukeyser, she tried to write all-inclusive, all-encompassing material. Sexton and Rukeyser embraced their worlds and witnessed their worlds, each from her individual point of view. For me this is their political statement: that women are free to write what we will, as we will, about whatever subject we wish. These two women, with their pens, leveraged the Women’s Movement forward another inch, or perhaps more.

As examples of women who eschewed the confessional and political for the more indirect and artful we have Marianne Moore and her protégée Elizabeth Bishop. Moore’s poetry is the work of the observer, not the participant, while Bishop’s poetry becomes that
of the observing participant. Working for many years under the critical eye of Moore, Bishop eventually released herself from Moore’s constraints to invent her own, more personal, more narrative, voice. Both women were highly critical of the confessions of poets like Lowell and Sexton. In a letter to Anne Stevenson, Bishop wrote:

“If I were a critic and had a good brain I think I’d like to write a study of “The School of Anguish” – Lowell (by far the best), Roethke, and Berryman and their descendants like Anne Sexton and Seidel, more and more anguish and less and less poetry. Surely never in all the ages has poetry been so personal and confessional – and I don’t think it is what I like, really – although I certainly admire Lowell’s.” (Miller 361)

Moore wrote “Three foremost aids to persuasion which occur to me are humility, concentration, and gusto.” She wrote further that “... humility seems to be a judicious modesty...” (MM Reader 123) Under this influence Bishop wrote in a letter to Moore many years after reading Moore’s essay entitled “Humility, Concentration and Gusto” saying, “I was interviewed by a journalist friend for a literary newspaper here, and imitating you, I’m afraid, I said I liked three things in poetry: Spontaneity, Accuracy, and Mystery.” (Bloom 125) Bonnie Costello writes of Bishop as “the seeker” and the poet of “moods and mysteries,” while Moore’s is “the poetry of manners and morals.” (Bloom 121-122)

Plath, Sexton, Rukeyser and Rich wrote about their lives as women, including the physical life of the body, the pull between that biological life and intellectual life, the trickeries of love, and the awesome or tyrannical presence of children, making female experience and sensibility viable and powerful subjects for poetry (Myers 196). It is possible that, as a lesbian, Bishop did not feel that pull of the biological life so much as she felt the trickeries of love, and the mental instability of the lovers and friends with whom
she surrounded herself. Also, while she wrote under Moore's tutelage, the physically personal, and therefore feminine, was not a subject for poetry. Brett Miller wrote that Bishop "did not want to be a 'woman poet' because she felt... that to be considered a woman poet would limit her power to reach a wider audience. 'Human experience' not 'women's experience,' was the proper subject for poetry, and she was quick to label overtly feminist poetry as 'propaganda.'" (Miller 333) Writing about Moore, Bloom says she "like Bishop and Swenson, is an extraordinary poet-as-poet. The issue of how gender enters into her vision should arise only after the aesthetic achievement is judged as such." (Bloom 2) Moore shared an emotionally, if not financially, stable home with her mother for most of her life, and in this situation could offer two motherly influences to Bishop's art and her personal life as much as she was allowed to do so.

Orphaned at an early age, and forever in search of a home, Bishop writes poetry that is rightly the poetry of the seeker, which implies the poetry of loss. Her villanelle "One Art" is one of modern poetry's finest examples of that form as well as a fine example of Bishop's ironic stance on persistent loss:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.
I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or next-to-last, of three loved houses went. The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

— Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident the art of losing’s not too hard to master though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster. (Bishop 178)

With a title that evokes associations of the art of being alone, the art of being one, single, without a partner or possessions, this poem was possibly triggered by the deterioration of Bishop’s relationship with Alice Methfessel. Elizabeth and Alice were living together in fall of 1975 when Bishop’s chronic alcoholism was in one of its worst phases. As was true of Sexton, it is amazing that Bishop could write as much and as well as she did, considering this ongoing problem and its accompanying illnesses and injuries. In a general sense Bishop lost a house, rivers, a realm or continent each time she lost a loved one. Her many losses, large and small are in this way magnified, although ironically, so the reader can sense their importance to the narrator. This poem was written later in Bishop’s career, when she was less constrained by Moore’s sensibilities and writing in a more narrative and personal voice.

Moore was more likely to write in a more objective, observational voice as in “The Sycamore.”

Against a gun-metal sky
I saw an albino giraffe. Without leaves to modify,

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chamois-white as
said, although partly pied near the base,
it towered where a chain of
stepping-stones lay in a stream nearby;
glamor to stir the envy
of anything in motley —
Hampshire pig, the living lucky-stone; or
all-white butterfly.
A commonplace:
there’s more than just one kind of grace.
We don’t like flowers that do
not wilt; they must die, and nine
she-camel hairs aid memory.

Worthy of Imami,
the Persian — clinging to a stiffer stalk
was a little dry
thing from the grass,
in the shape of a Maltese cross,
retiringly formal
as if to say: “And there was I
like a field-mouse at Versailles.” (Moore 167)

Although Moore uses concrete terms throughout this poem, she makes an obscure
reference or two in the tradition of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, both of whom she admired
greatly. For instance, the phrase “nine she-camel hairs” is a reference to the paint brush of
Imami, a prize winning Persian artist. This information appears in the notes which
accompany most of her poems. All the same, Hugh Kenner wrote of Moore that “The notes are
not, like the notes to The Waste Land, part of our education; we are certainly not meant to look up
the sources; the author says she hopes that we will ‘take probity on faith’ and disregard them”
(Bloom 19).
Moore makes "The Sycamore" a poem of observation entirely until an "I" enters at the end of the penultimate line, but even then it is not the "I" of the narrator but the "I" of some anonymous "little dry thing from the grass." The little thing compares its small self to the towering Sycamore "like a field-mouse" to the walls of Versailles. The only way we can know the poet in this poem is in the impeccable descriptions and comparisons. The little dry thing is "retiringly formal" which allows us to know what the poet knows about manners. The mention of Imami the Persian, a Maltese cross and Versailles lets us know that the poet has knowledge of other cultures than that of her homeland. The Maltese cross has military implications which, in addition to the "thing" discussed being dry and "clinging to a stiffer stalk," implies the stiffness of the formality as well. The little thing is saluting the gigantic Sycamore, and taking note of its superior size, and perhaps rank, one upright growing thing to another.

In Moore's tradition the Sycamore may have represented some person she looked up to. After all, she has described a glacier in terms of an octopus, and a cat as like a porcupine, alligator, shad, prune, and frog.

The only way we can know the author or narrator in a poem like this is by implication. The language, subject and mood are all we have. We must then apply our wits to see anything of the narrator's attitudes, morals, and manners. This is completely by intention on Moore's part.

Although she always supported Bishop in whatever she attempted, Moore did not always approve of Bishop's language usage or of her more personal narrative voice. Moore was much more in favor of holding an object or subject at arm's length and discussing its merits in as objective a voice as she could muster. Even Moore's elaborate
syllabic lines and stanzas were an attempt at distance, and at creating a work of art. She believed her work should be more for the eye and the brain than for the voice or reading aloud, so the form of the poem on the page was very important to her, and then "a certain music" in the language. Bishop took Moore as a pattern for her early work and later diverged from that pattern as her own art and voice developed. Neither woman bared her political soul in her poetry to any great extent. They both were preoccupied with poetry as art and artifice, but not as a political platform.

Sexton and Rukeyser are as entwined in my mind as Bishop and Moore. Although Sexton and Rukeyser weren't as close friends as Bishop and Moore, each one's poetry reflects something of the precedence-setting of the other. Moore was more directly a mentor to Bishop in that she found grants, fellowships and positions for Bishop during her career.

Into this array of talent, the women I consider to be my artistic fore-mothers, I humbly introduce my own poems for what they will be worth. Political stances creep into the language of my work even though the art of poetry is my primary concern. Critical readers have already named me a feminist poet in the tradition of Plath, Sexton, Rukeyser and Rich. Even though I occasionally wax confessional, those who read and listen a little closer have said I write cleverly, like Moore, and narratively and imagistically like Bishop. I accept all of these comparisons gratefully, but am more fond of those to Moore and Bishop. I am as fond of the surreal moment in nature as each of them were.
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