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GLASS SHOULDERS

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GLASS
SHOULDERS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Poetry

by
Carol Jean Simpson
June 2015

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SHOULDERS

A Project
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Approved by:

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Juan Delgado, Second Reader

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ABSTRACT

Glass Shoulders is a collection of poems that embody events from my life which have served as catalysts in the process of integrating myself emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. In the poetry, the speaker searches for spiritual knowledge, and is guided toward meditation of Spirit as an internal reality to find healing. The narrative of the manuscript portrays the speaker's deep introspection of self, exploring loss and resiliency through challenges surrounding grief, unrecovered abuses, and mood disorders. The inspiration for these poems arose from my contemplations on the incongruities between fate and free will, and how behaviors are influenced by the attitude of each. The poems explore her innermost conflicts as she contemplates whether she is director of her own destiny, or subject to a predestined fate, and seek to illumine how these differences effect her choices, behaviors, and attitude towards Spirit. The speaker is bipolar, and the paradox of the book debates whether the union of her polar selves is the ingredient to healing her phobias and disconnections, granting Spirit integration, or do her fractured selves support greater sensory experience that enhance her perceptions of self and Spirit toward new levels of recognition. The poems contain a variety of humor, tone, and voice. The humor in the poetry is unconscious to the speaker and shields her from her sense of loss and separation from her partner, her family, and divinity. At times she appears sarcastic and flippant, curious and gullible, yet always there is an undercurrent of deep thought. My visions and images for the poems are sourced from the

philosophies of metaphysics, and are inspired by both Western and Eastern teachings of mysticism and myth that leads to Self-realization, or God-communion. It is through my studies of these sciences and methodologies that I have sourced my life long aspirations of spiritual knowledge for greater understanding of the human condition. *Glass Shoulders* is my attempt to show Self-realization as a gnosis of healing. This is a tale of freedom of psyche.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

GLASS SHOULDERS

“Breath is the outer world coming into one’s body.”

–Gary Snyder, “Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry
as an Ecological Survival Technique”

Inhale. Let your belly round, your rib cage expand, feel your shoulders gently lift. Retain the breath. Exhale. Travel to the bottom of your breath. Draw your navel back toward your spine, hollow your belly. Linger here, in the natural pause of breath—the space of peace, the prelude to creation. Poetry is like breath. Poetry enlivens my senses as an inhalation of unspeakable joy that then releases as an exhalation of inner peace into the mysterious depths of my soul. This peace offers the space for a deeper contemplation of myself and my world, allowing new discoveries to cycle through my conscious and unconscious inspirations that stimulate my writing. My poems are my aspirations in developing self-awareness and a greater understanding of my relationship with Spirit. The art of poetry synchronizes with the breathing techniques of yoga—the art of harmonizing oneself with Spirit. Poet, essayist, and translator, Gary Snyder portrays this harmony through his poetics. Snyder sought to converge the social revolution of the West with Eastern ideologies in his poetry and teachings. His deep interest in ecology and politics of reform led to his studies in Buddhist

spirituality, which grew his appreciation of the values shared by archaic and modern cultures to deepen insight of self. His poetics portray one's relationship with nature and spirit as a means of attaining deeper levels of self-awareness:

“The Poet can make it on his own voice...while steering a course between crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable nonverbal states and the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language...Poetry is the vehicle for the mystery of voice. The universe, as they [Mahayana Buddhism] sometimes say, is a vast breathing body.” (Snyder, 435).

The harmony of yoga brings us closer to the nectar of the Unknown. The philosophy of yoga is based on the precept that unlimited truth and beauty of Spirit is impassioned as the human soul. A system of mind and body practices characterize and cultivate a refinement of psyche toward this awareness, examining the nature of human potential as infinite—as capable of existing beyond rational awareness and beyond impermanence of the manifest world. The art of yoga is one's individual pursuit and expression of this philosophy, awakening a profound realization of Self.

For me, poetry is my yoga. Poetry is the language of yoga, and while yoga informs the intensity of my life experiences, poetry is the quality of intensity and deep resonance of those experiences. As the techniques of yoga maintain inherent transformational detail, the meditation possible in a poem can penetrate ordinary awareness to greater possibilities of perception between ourselves and the otherworldly. Poetry exceeds the limitations of language to communicate the world, and the feelings and imagination a poem invoke speak in a universal

language inherent in a collective unconscious of shared humanity. The synergies between poetry and yoga inform and develop my growth of self-awareness and my relationship with Spirit, while writing poetry has become my art for discovery and reflection on this process.

Poets who influence me greatly are those who explore the divine in poetry. Poetry pursues contemplation of ourselves and our world by examining the breadth of human nature through various paradigms of the human condition. I find resonance in poems which place me as a pilgrim of devotion and discovery, whose thought and lyricism provoke my attitude toward the interplay of the phenomenal and ethereal and point to my own potential to align with the harmony of the cosmos. While living in yoga ashrams studying within the Gurukula system of education, where spiritual and worldly knowledge is passed directly from teacher to student in the spirit of devotion, poetry was first introduced to me. Throughout instruction, readings of mystical poets such as Mirabai, Rumi, Hafiz, and Rilke have influenced my compassion toward the nature of poetry to illumine Spirit. To me, these poets have organized their vision and experience with Spirit into the imagery and musicality of verse, stimulating imagination toward irrational modes of perception in an effort to experience unknown realities that lie beyond one's typical paradigm of perception: "You are the bird whose wings came / when I wakened in the night and called. / ...I called because your name / is like a chasm, a thousand nights deep. / ...you are the image, but I am the frame." (Rilke, 33). Rilke poses himself as the "frame," the

container of Spirit—a “guardian angel,” as a “bird whose wings came” as “[he] wakened in the night and called.” Through these lines I experience Rilke’s tone and language as that of devotion, as a lover yearning toward the love of the Divine, who has “wakened” to a perception of Spirit within himself, his soul. Devotional poetry such as this offers the freedom of my imagination to explore the character of my soul and to contemplate my relationship with Spirit.

As an initiate in the Bhakti tradition of yoga, the yoga of devotion, my poetry is inspired by a pattern that speaks of human love and divine love without separation. Throughout the collection the speaker’s attempts to align with Spirit as Divine Lover are pursued by forming conversations between the voices of her fragmented conscience. These voices represent her fractured selves that are the result of mental illness, emotional abuse, and the sense of loss and separation characterized by death and grieving. The voice of Spirit in the poems is posed as her personal “guardian angel,” her spirit guide, who appears in different guises throughout the poems—bear paws, birds, a friend with cake frosting on her lip, for example. The movement of these voices throughout the collection provoke the speaker’s sensory experience, stimulating and expanding perceptions of herself in the world as a reflection of Spirit. Woven through a multi-voice narrative, composed of interior monologue and multi-voice dialogue, communication is nurtured between these voices. An aural texturizing of the poems is created and pushes forward through an array of tone wandering over human emotion.

The speaker's perception of Spirit begins as an objective viewpoint and transitions through the book toward the recognition of Spirit as a subjective experience—Spirit expressed through her soul from within, rather than reflected back as an external reality. This leads to the understanding of the falsity of separation between self and other. This new cohesive sense of self becomes her pathway to emotional and psychological freedom, releasing previous inhibitions that dictated her personality and sense of self in limiting ways. With this premise, the poems attempt to show her process of Self-realization—her refinement of consciousness through the guidance offered by her guardian angel.

*My Teacher shot an arrow, it passed all the way through.
Now its absence burns in my heart, in my restless body.* (Mirabai, 26)

One of my favorite poets, Mirabai, was a Hindu mystic poet of Bhakti yoga. She was born c. 1498 in Rajasthan, India and is considered one of the foremost Saints of the Bhakti tradition. Today, her poems continue to be translated into contemporary music and poetry, while films and novels interpret her life and legacy. She is celebrated throughout India, and her temple shrines flourish with devotees and visitors. The mysticism of Bhakti yoga encompasses the notion of romantic love for a woman or man as synonymous with either the Divine Feminine or the Divine Masculine—primordial female and male principles of Spirit. Poems, or bhajans—sacred songs, are composed in praise of god and explore one's individual relationship to god as a lover. In her bhajans of devotion,

Mirabai yearns for god in this way: "It is your beauty that makes me drunk. / Mira's lord is the Great Dark Snake. That love comes / up from the ground of the heart." (Mirabai, 39). The passion behind her lines, the sensuality of image they invoke, show me the possibilities of poetry to stimulate the senses toward spiritual awareness. My poems attempt this experience through language and image that invoke a yearning of Divine Lover by depicting the sensual and romantic nature of this longing as inspired by human love. I portray this relationship in my poem "[Nascent]," "Nascent and yellow / tendered limbed, / I take the first step toward you / with only myself to roll up against. / You lean in, cup my hip in your hand / halos of white eagles dance on our heads / drum angel bones / a red hum." The poem is inspired by the speaker's memory of an experience with her lover "you lean in, cup my hip in your hand," yet the possibilities behind these lines include the speaker's perception of lover as a divine manifestation: "halos of white eagles dance on our heads." This indistinct potential of the narrative occurs throughout many of the poems and are my efforts to create an effervescent atmosphere in which to dissolve boundaries between the physical and spiritual, human and divine love.

The bhajans of Mirabai, and comparably the Sufism poetics of Rumi and Hafiz emphasize ecstatic love in this way, reaching through human love to the Divine. Poets and writer, Jane Hirshfield has translated new creative versions of Mirabai's bhajans, of which Hirshfield writes, "[Mirabai's] experience is as recognizably grounded in a fully human passion as it is in the realm of spiritual

realization. Anyone who has loved beyond reason knows what Mira lived, as anyone who has loved beyond self interest know also what Love is.” (Hirshfield, xiv). The last poem of the collection, “[A cedar winter sneezes]” demonstrates Spirit as a physical experience of divinity moving through and grounding in the speaker’s body:

“A cedar winter sneezes

echinacea

washes

the lake

swans and bluebonnets

return like pilgrims

knowledge syruped,

little stones

in the moon’s palm.

I feel you shuffle the silence beside me,
your breath pillow my face.

I fold you in my hands heart-center
and chant to myself namaste namaste”

My affinity with Mirabai extends also through a commonly shared human experience—the death of a lover. After the death of Mirabai’s spouse she chose a path of inward contemplation of self and god as lovers, which practices lead to an alchemical marriage with the divine. Similarly, the death of my partner has

caused me to reframe my perspective of romantic love and divine love and to pursue recognition and union with Spirit within myself as a salvage from grief and separation. My poetry is the impetus of my striving toward gnosis as a means of healing. For me, emotional and psychological healing are the precursors necessary in my process of Self-realization.

This driving force toward integration of spirit and body are demonstrated by the second poem in the collection:

“I pull my scarf low over my head
shove out the sludge of night.
Stars peck at the clouds with their beaks
a sullen air nettles in.

I’m walking like the old Italians—
Ladies from Noni’s neighborhood,
hands busy counting rosary
heads bent to prayer.

I side-step the ice down the bank
thumbing mala, mumbling mantra
Winter yawns its porridge mouth
one last feather, a quite white.”

This poem launches the significance of the speaker’s grief and loneliness throughout the collection, “I pull my scarf low over my head / shove out the sludge of night...a sullen air nettles in,” and her turn toward spiritual practice as a hope of preservation. She remembers her grandmother’s religious devotion, represented in the second stanza by the rosary, and attempts to resemble this by “thumbing mala, mumbling mantra” in an effort to find her own path of devotional love.

*Something has reached out and taken in the beams of my eyes.
I believe I can bear on my shoulders whatever you want to say of me.*
(Mirabai, 3)

I have written the poems in free verse and although many of the poems arrive with an independent distinction, together they sustain a single narrative relaying a story from events in my life which have served as catalysts in my growth of self-knowledge. The speaker in the collection contains aspects of my character and personality; however, she is not me but rather a dramatic character. She preserves my emotional memories, creating distance from my conscious and rational mind so that I may write about myself with more clarity. By using this technique I allow her to confront my greatest life challenges that would otherwise remain submerged in my subconscious and unable to heal. Surveying myself in this way provides the opportunity to see my strengths and weaknesses with a more objective view. I believe this distance contributes to a more honest portrayal of my life experiences. In his essay, "Reflections on Narrative Poetry," poet Louis Simpson discusses the role of "dramatic character" as a method of distancing the author: "Storytelling is an impersonal kind of art, even when the story appears to be about oneself. The "I" who appears in the poem is a dramatic character...I would advise the poet to be as objective about himself as possible. In this way, you will not be locked into the treadmill of your own personal history, treading the same stairs again and again." (Simpson, 410). Simpson writes that for the narrative poet to interpret experience, "[You] take

what you need and rearrange it, and you invent. (408). While the poems in the collection represent honest renditions from events in my life, I have sorted emotional episodes from these events, dramatizing their essence in order to move the plot forward toward a concise narrative, and in so doing I have “rearranged” and re-invented.

Robert Bly, poet, author, translator, and activist is famous for promoting the movement of American poetry away from the intellectual and objectivity of Modernist poetics, to a poetics infused with inward contemplation of self. He established a literary magazine for poetry translation, introducing international poets of this nature, such as Rilke and Mirabai, among others. His essay, “What the Image Can Do,” similarly poses Simpson’s ideas on the dramatization of character as a personality necessary in attaining “the sixth power” of poetry: “As the sixth power, I’ll name the narrative, the story, the fiction, the tale, the imagined entertainment. The poet, in order to enter this power has to imagine personalities.” (Bly, 41). In essence, Bly asserts that personalities, the “imagined entertainment” as the energy needed to feed the “overall power of the poem.” My speaker is an imagined personality, crafted after my inner-most joys, fears, and obsessions. I have discovered the efficacy of this method by re-imagining portions of my life in the poems through scenes that grant the subject matter of the narrative space to create objectivity through the speaker’s perspective. This objectivity supports my healing process by releasing myself from “treading the same stairs.” My interpretation of Bly and Simpson’s ideas is that by separating

my feelings from myself through a “dramatic character,” I am better able to “move them [feelings] in one direction or another.” (Simpson, 410). Simpson proposes that this process allows the poet to write poems to be read by others, as opposed to merely purging a feeling. For instance, in the poem “[I park my truck]” I dramatize the speaker’s trepidation as she walks alone through a graveyard at night, “Graveyards feel crowded, like exiles gathered around a burning tower / prophets and artists, prostitutes, addicts // No where to go in a tightened sky.” The speaker searches for her deceased lover’s grave while dressed in a contradictory way to the ghostly and unearthly atmosphere of the graveyard: “I’m wearing the gold halter top we bought at the City Wide last spring. / A quarter yard of vintage pleated fabric...a triangle...with sequined thread you said / made me look like an ice-dancer in a chalet.” This image of the speaker lifts an attitude of solemnity to an alternative temperament, employing the ideas of narrative entertainment of Simpson and Bly.

The strength of the poems lay beyond the release of my emotions. They function to exemplify human nature through the character of the speaker by representing conditions common to human experience. The universal claims the poems make through the dramatic character’s vulnerabilities and triumphs inspire the reader’s compassion and empathy for her, opening a pathway in which to discover, explore, or confront their own similar conditions. It is because she is fallible that we are able to identify with her and see our own truths more broadly. Through her eyes, we see ourselves. We see our own limitations through her

deficiencies as well as our own hopes through her striving. As she overcomes her challenges, we see new possibilities available in attempting our own, and because of this, we begin to trust her as she leads us through what is our own narrative within the human condition.

The narrative arc of the book unfolds the speaker's challenges and successes through themes that explore resiliency, spiritual awakening, and freewill as a self-determining fate. The poems travel into myth and mysticism illumining metaphysical perspectives characterizing discourse on the development of consciousness and humanity's interaction with Spirit. This precept of mysticism and philosophy serve as the foundation for the speaker's central aspiration—her development of Self-realization, of which gnosis leads her and ultimately provides respite through the challenges of her partner's suicide, her mental disorder, and emotional abuses.

Throughout the process of writing these poems, I continue to discover how often in my life I use humor to cover my social phobias, depression, anxieties, and abuses not yet recovered. As a bipolar person I often feel that I am split in two, "one side desert, forgetful; the other pooled and quantum, three-and-a-half revolutions." ("[You missed my sword dance]"). In a figurative sense, this "split" translates as a separation from Spirit. When I feel mentally and emotionally fractured, I often sense Spirit as an external force rather than an internal reality—my soul as God-head. Through the speaker, it is my aim to inspire those suffering from abuses, grief, bipolar and other mood disorders, toward self-

contemplation of spirit as a method to uncover one's potential despite predetermined circumstances. My hope of healing, for myself and others, is that these poems will inspire self-mastery and emotional freedom, as Mirabai's poems reflect, enabling one to determine their own circumstances in which to live their life according to their will, regardless of social stigmas or biases that support the homogeneity of human behavior and perception. The words of the great poet Maya Angelou strengthen my resolve to write about these issues: "You may not control all of the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Stand up straight and realize who you are, that you tower over your circumstances. You are a child of God. Stand up straight." For me, I believe there are many to causes and stigmas that surround mental disorders, suicide, and physical and emotional abuses. However, this manuscript is not my attempt to debate these issues, but to provoke compassion and understanding toward these afflictions and to embolden others toward self-acceptance and Self-realization.

This is a tale of freedom—psychologically and emotionally. The humor in the poetry is unconscious to the speaker and shields her from her sense of loss and separation from her partner, her family, and divinity. At times, she appears sarcastic and flippant, curious and gullible, yet always there is an undercurrent of deep thought: "You know you've tumbled low when you get fired from a titty-bar my friend says, / cake frosting on her lip. // I feel like a stale wind compressed in volumes of scent exhaled by vintage perfume bulb spray. // I don't know how to

answer.” (“[I’m standing in a parking lot]”). The poems explore her innermost conflicts as she contemplates whether she is the director of her own destiny, or a subject of a predestined fate, and seek to illumine how these differences effect her choices, behaviors and attitude toward Spirit. The paradox of the book debates whether the union of her polar selves is the ingredient to healing her phobias and disconnections, granting Spirit integration, or do her fractured selves support greater sensory experience that enhance her perceptions of self and Spirit toward new levels of recognition. The poems explore the plausibility of each, neither of which confirm or deny the speaker’s experience of Self-realization.

What can you tell me of love? Whose pathways are filled with strangeness?
(Mirabai, 44)

Throughout the collection the voices indicated by italics often appear in the form of question and answer: “how do you know the distance from earth to breath” / “By the dusk that drinks up our sweat” The questions are posed by the speaker and answered by the guardian angel. My intention is to model these “answers” after the essences of koans, so that the speaker is prodded toward contemplation of self, heightening her perceptions of the Unknown. Often times the voice of introspection appears as hopeful or self-doubting, anguished and reminiscent, or simply curious: “how do you nudge joy from sad places? “With the glow of buttercups held under our chins.”; “How do you measure the curve of the

first sigh of Nothingness to the corner in the current of breath? / By the lamp of the sun in our interlocked hands.” The guardian angel’s responses never pass judgment, but serve only as stimulus that will provoke her consciousness toward irrational modes of perceiving, guiding her along the path toward Self-realization. Also, throughout the book there are voices besides the speaker and angel working through italicized lines that sound more like a narrator, as if introducing a new Act in a play:

*“In a mirror of gnarled branches
between ember and inhale
through a clatter of doves
a hawk watches.Count*

Until the wine-lit fire on your tongue mouths o-n-e”

Whether the italicized lines throughout the book are posed as question and answer, or appear as a “chorus,” the character of the book is threaded by such lines to propel the narrative forward while serving as topic titles, indicating a new set of circumstances which will be reflected in the next set of poems.

The Dark One threw me a glance like a dagger today. Since that moment, I am insane. I can't find my body. At least three of my friends are completely mad.
(Mirabai, 4)

The larger existential questions that the collection poses through the speaker are often probed through humor, and while the speaker appears whimsical at times there is a suggestion of self reflection that surrounds her sense of loss, isolation, and sadness. In his essay "Lightness," writer and essayist Italo Calvino discusses the value of combining melancholy and humor as a narrative technique to create a sense of "weightless gravity" as a reaction to the weight of living. (19). For instance, he associates melancholy as "sadness that has taken on lightness" and he states, "humor is comedy that has lost its bodily weight. It casts doubt on the self, on the world, and the whole network of relationships that are at stake." (19). In the manuscript, I intermingle humor with a melancholic tone as a narrative method of exposing the hardship of emotional truth. This tone also becomes an avenue for the development of trust between reader and speaker by creating new perspectives to emerge out of "weightless gravity," prompting us to see our own vulnerabilities objectively through the speaker's mistakes, without feeling we have to defend ourselves:

"I shake my lips at the sky—
Don't you know not to do this to me!
There's madness in my family!
I throw shoes through windows!" (Simpson, 24).

The tone of these lines hold a sense of silliness, yet here the speaker is experiencing the “anger stage” of grieving. She’s mad at God, her partner, family, and anyone who has ever caused her pain. Anyone who has been through this stage of grieving can empathize with her. Her vulnerabilities are identifiable and her lessons of self-awareness become opportunities for the reader’s own growth. She offers hope and encouragement to alter conditions which otherwise may cause harm or inhibit personal truths and desires. The following lines, “One drink with dinner won’t hurt / A second with a bubble bath is necessary / Definitely with dildos Never on Sundays,” are delivered through humor to mask her struggles with grief and her guilty conscience of using alcohol as a deterrent from facing her emotions. Humor doesn’t preach, but functions as a means of subtle suggestion, stimulating imagination in ways that new perspectives may be absorbed without risk to one’s established paradigm. In his book, *This Craft of Verse*, Argentinian poet, writer, and thinker, Jorge Luis Borges states:

“...as I understand it, anything suggested is far more effective than anything laid down. Perhaps the human mind has a tendency to deny a statement. Remember what Emerson said, “arguments convince nobody.”—But when something is merely said or—better still—hinted at, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination. We are ready to accept it.” (Borges, 31).

Returning to Calvino’s ideas of “weightless gravity,” he also proposes that a lightness of language and image lift perception of both the reader and poet from the weight of subjects, “the concreteness of tangible subjects,” as if “thought were darting out of darkness in quick lightning flashes.” As the book pursues

somber subjects—suicide, abuse, mental illness—I use antinomies of light and dark images to achieve a sense of weightlessness: “My head globes in the gold of a last moon / searching through swamped-moss bayous for your grave.” The “gold moon” lifts perception through the somber darkness of a “swamped-moss grave.” Calvino says that as soon as the moon appears in poetry it brings with it a sensation of lightness, suspension, a silent calm enchantment.” (Calvino, 24). Although I feel the moon is a traditional poetic convention, I nonetheless include its image along with others, such as suns and swans for example, throughout the collection as images of “lightness” which I cast against dark images and dark themes. My attempt is to re-imagine these conventions through the animation of nature in new ways and with new flavor. For instance, “I lay my head in a skunk bed of mid-summer nettles / watch the moon unbutton light from her orbiting hip.” (“[It’s too late to notice]”). “Skunk” and “nettles” are images of “weight,” while the sense of “lightness” comes from an orbiting moon unbuttoning light from her hip. By using these strokes of dark and light images and surreal imagination, my intention is to reflect the consistent transfiguring of the speaker—emotionally, mentally, spiritually—in concert with nature throughout the narrative to create a sense of rising above the weight and gravities of the physical world that threaten her goals of healing and transformation.

The single Lotus will swallow you whole!

(Mirabai, 44)

My poems often personify the natural world as mirrors of human emotion. I have discovered that by aligning my senses with Spirit through nature my internal awareness is heightened. My images show how Spirit moves through the physical world by animating nature and how this affects the development of the psyche and human behavior. The following line selections reflect the speaker's emotional and psychological states: "There are no swans here / Snow has swallowed the lake / Naked water clicks her teeth / Dreaming of white feathered bellies." These lines portray the speaker's mood as numb and frightened with a sense of isolation. Likewise, "Winter yawns its porridge mouth / one last feather, a quiet white." Here, the speaker's mood is felt as lonesome, suspended in time with a sense of hopelessness. The book begins in winter after the speaker's partner has died. These lines are excerpted from the first two poems in the collection and establish a somber atmosphere that will shift into new atmospheric tones underscoring emotions that depict the speaker's interaction with Spirit as she moves through the seasons. For instance, "Morning's innocence tumbles light / and I wake to taste the buttered heart of sun...trees shake their hair...a lotus blinks her eye." These lines hold a sense of the cool freshness of spring, a new beginning and a lightness of spirit.

All I was doing was breathing
(Mirabai, 3)

Across the manuscript, I animate breath through various movements of nature as a purveyor of Spirit interacting with the speaker's consciousness and surroundings. In Sanskrit, the word for breath, prana, is defined as "life" or "breathing forth," and is perceived amongst sacred texts of Hinduism as the universal life force, or energy, that underlies the entirety of manifestation. Yogic thought teaches that in the phenomenal world, prana is a psychophysical energy that is moved throughout nature by the breath, which functions to join prana and consciousness toward greater levels of self-awareness. (*Hatha Yoga Pradapika*, 156-157). The Pradapika equates prana to Spirit in the physical world, stating, "Prana is the tangible manifestation of the higher Self [and] the key to expand the awareness of consciousness and realize the Self." (157). Through strokes that animate breath as a reflection of Self in the natural world, my poetry presumes prana as Spirit in alignment with Yogic thought. In this manner, the presence of breath woven through the narrative illumines the speaker's course of Spiritual awakening. For instance, breath as a portrayal of the contraction of consciousness is shown by these lines previously modeled: "I feel like a stale wind compressed in volumes of scent exhaled by vintage perfume bulb spray / I don't know how to answer." Breath as "wind compressed" and "stale air" evoke a sense of self-consciousness, corresponding to the speaker's embarrassment that this poem is speaking to. Another example, "Brittle feather squeeze a wet air"

represents a state of contracted consciousness and invokes a sense of agitation. Throughout the collection, the speaker contemplates life and death through the lens of freewill. I image breath as an existential force to symbolize her opposition to her partner's choice of suicide: "Breath: / a choice to beat the heart / to earth into its flowerbeds / to syncopate with color." Animating breath in these ways furthers the potential of image to create a psychosomatic response in the reader, and signifies a link between the natural and the supernatural where the speaker's shifting awareness of self in relation to both earth and cosmos is illumined.

Water is another recurring feature shown as a unifying spirit throughout the book. Various manifestations and forms of water appear throughout the poems, such as rivers, lakes, snow, and ice, animated as metaphors of the speaker's dreams and hopes, psychic visions, and spiritual yearnings. When the speaker is overcoming an obstacle successfully and her growth of self-love and Self-awareness increases, water is depicted as fluid: "...a single lung hangs loosely / above a jagged slit of stone / nude / after the the river's surrender to the broth" I am using water in these lines as a metaphor of individual consciousness—the "river" moving toward Spirit-consciousness— the "broth." Alternatively, lines such as "we hour inside steamed wells" show emotion as undetermined, "steamed," as if the speaker is in a state of indecision where time is ticking by, and "I sidestep the ice down the bank" shows the speaker's descent into depression. It is an image of water that I use to inform the crux of the narrative, "Inked rain pinches the back of my head / the night you sold your sword for that gun." Water as

“inked rain” pushes anguish and disbelief as the undercurrent of the speaker’s psyche throughout most of the book, even while many poems convey tones and images that are opposite to this solemnity.

And love’s knife entered my heart
(Mirabai, 45)

The magical symbol of the speaker’s transformation in the book is her sword, which acts in a variety of ways throughout the poems representing her Will and Fate. It is her sword of Truth, representing gnosis, self-love and self-knowledge. As an image of her aspirations toward Self-realization the sword reflects the speaker’s anxieties and hopes; its characterization reveals her level of self-mastery. In his essay “Quickness,” Italo Calvino discusses the significance of objects in a plot:

“...the moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships. The symbol of an object may be more or less explicit but it is always there...in a narrative way, object is always magic.”

The mystical quality of the speaker’s sword feeds the energy of the poems through the first half of the book and serves as a narrative link between the speaker’s fragmented voices by mimicking her actions and choices as her perceptions of self change. In the essay Calvino says, “movements [of objects] determine those of the characters and establishes a relationship between them.”

My poetic expression of Calvino's ideas show the sword speaking as intermediary between the speaker and her angel, serving as an emblem of their slippery boundary:

"That's when I heard my sword speak:

Your lover is waiting Best sex ever!
Your guardian angel Your tour guide
Sleeping inside Waiting for you Wake her up!

You mean my lover is an angel,

Stalking my organs Getting drunk on my marrow Suntanning her wings on my Chi!

this headache
these hiccups
that itch I can't reach

Yawning Dawdling Tapping her hoof Bored Waiting to wake up?
Or, is it her that's awake
and I'm the one dawdling my life in a dream?

(My sword asks tough questions, it's hard to say)"

I sum it all up: Whatever you call it– Buddha Jesus Laxmi Chocolate!

It all means the same–
Divinity, Union, The Great Cosmic Kiss

A sloppy wet mouthful of juicy spit!
And I want it." ("[Sword Speak]," Simpson).

In this poem the speaker is awakening to Spirit as Divine Lover, which relationship the sword continues to elucidate throughout the collection. When the speaker's behavior is in alignment with Spirit her sword is her innermost strength

“[that] banishes all fears, self-doubt, bad habits, and repetitive patterning.” At times it is romantic and melancholy, “to measure the circumference of our pupils glued / to trace your wing print in a meadow.” It is unclear whether these lines are speaking to the loss of her lover or her sense of separation from Spirit. While this elusiveness functions thematically throughout the narrative, the sword often assumes the duty to illumine the ambiguity of divisions between human love, divine love, and self love.

*Mira lives now beyond Mira.
She swims, deep mind and deep body, in Shyam's ocean.*
(Mirabai, 54)

Glass Shoulders is my attempt to illustrate the process of alchemical integration that characterizes the undertaking of the refinement of senses toward non-ordinary perceptions of the Unknown, allowing for growth of Self-realization. In the poetry, I illustrate the method of integrating self with Spirit through paradoxes both psychologically and emotionally as stimulants to this process. My intention is that the images, language, and variety of tone and voice will sharpen the reader's perceptions to align with the speaker so that a collective gnosis is experienced. My visualizations for the poems are sourced by the philosophies of metaphysics and are inspired by both Western and Eastern teachings of mysticism and myth. It is through my studies of these sciences and

methodologies that I have sourced my life long aspirations of spiritual knowledge toward greater understanding of myself and my purpose for being.

Through writing poetry, I discover myself by witnessing the world through human nature. I feel that the possibilities of self-reflection that poetry offers show the power of art to expand sensory experience and to create non-ordinary perceptions of our selves and our shared humanity. For me, this is vital to creating acceptance, compassion, and unconditional love. Writing has led me to discover that poetry is the medium that best integrates mind, body, and spirit, so that I may perceive greater truth and beauty in myself and in the world. I have learned through teachings and life experiences that as we elevate our perceptions of self, we elevate each other and our world toward greatness. These poems access my innermost challenges and growth and reflect my ongoing journey toward healing and self-love.

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APPENDIX
GLASS
SHOULDERS