



THE WOMAN IN RED

by

Cynthia Hogue



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*for Hawk
and in memory
of
Ian Fletcher*

Now is life very solid or very shifting? . . . This has gone on for ever; will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world—this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous . . . Perhaps it may be that though we change, one flying after another, so quick, so quick, yet we are somehow successive and continuous we human beings, and show the light through. But what is the light?

Virginia Woolf

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NOTE: A centered asterisk indicates the poem has been broken mid-stanza.

Introduction

Reality may be finite, even recurrent despite its fresh and curious faces, but approaches to reality seem unlimited. I can think of no adjective-noun label to describe Cynthia Hogue's poetry. With its metaphysical suppleness and essential unity between motive and execution, this book illuminates the strategies of a particular mind as it seeks for accuracy, as it investigates the uses of language within the inclusive movements which structure a poem. ***The Woman in Red*** is a work of new, vivid combinations and passionate meditation. As there is no single emphasis—lyric, narrative, etc.—in the shaping of these poems, they continually surprise; “. . . but how we I you speak to each / other” is very much the matter of this book. Yet is Hogue questioning, making a statement, or throwing out a tonal aside? Read and see.

Virginia Woolf's words which declare this book open should be taken as a clue for reading what follows. They heighten what underlies the inquiries and observations within the poems. Hogue's diction is mercurial, playful in its urgency. Even as it stumbles and twists, we are carried into a precision of perception or thought, only to be sent free-floating again as her words stretch towards truth and true feeling. The strain is part of our reading. I'm baffled and instructed by how these poems can be so wrenching and still retain their sinewy grace. Within the complexities of her writing, Hogue's voice may also be down to earth and, to me from my distances, especially American in tone as well as image:

As the war revved up
they built hundreds
of little brick houses
for the munitions plant workers—
most of them women
left alone with their kids.
Man, those sticks and stone yards
looked like hell until the war ended
and there was no place but home
for the women again.
“Desert Palimpsest”

Balance the plain speaking of those lines with the first stanza of “The Suicide Sonnet” where helplessness and disorientation press up against the rhyming form showing, perhaps, not only the personal difficulties of acceptance, but the awkward incongruity of this form itself for working through contemporary expression:

To be sad today and not to be able to
said at all. This disjuncture
of voice and memory, the something pure
like love past heat past letting know.

Hogue's quest through language itself is less theoretical than personal and courageous. The poems become transparent with pain, puzzlement, and celebration to reveal the particularities of her mind and heart. To quote parts of these poems is unfair, for it's the startling *wholes* they make which move and inform me.

To say *The Woman in Red* is unique is flabby understatement. There are variations of voice and poetic shaping, even within a single poem. Often the pronouns shift, yet Hogue's vibrant intelligence has me both thinking and feeling in fresh, transformative ways. The focus is on "she"—the I as she, the you as she, as well as third-person shes—and while there are male presences, it's the women spoken of, and to, who stay in charge. These women may be figures of magic and power who are also flawed and vulnerable. Some slip out of myth only to dash around unfamiliar corners; some are friends, or a neighborhood of women on a streetcar. Others populate the poet's family—sisters, mother, and especially grandmother. But there are no cozy earth-mothers, simplistic in their decorative aprons. These women are not images; they are human, recognizable but not clichéd. This is not "women's poetry" in any publisher's-blurb sense. *The Woman in Red* holds moments of fear, of difficult suffering gilded by toughness. Here there are poems of abiding affection and resilience. Hogue's people are simply valuable. Her men are emblematic and more elusive: a somewhat faded father, a man of the present who suggests possible balances, the assailant, and dipping in and out of the book like an angel in traffic is the "lover" from her past—a figure of unresolved conversations, unfinished business. This "lost lover, old life" demands acknowledgment, but in the long run he can't interfere with the poet's present passions and abilities. By blood and friendship, the women in these poems bond as voyagers and what they share seems timeless even if enclosed by narrative. Some of Hogue's poems are rooted in childhood and the atmosphere of a family gone askew but still holding tight to its loyalties. Some of these poems blaze with the fantastic, but never the unbelievable.

Hogue's landscapes are chill and flushed. The physical world and the mystical world reveal themselves in Denmark, upper New York State, Iceland, and Arizona. From the desert's interior to lava fields to whatever moves beneath the sea, these poems fall into, and through, our world. As their reality strengthens, the seams split and mesh; the merchants of Tucson's Miracle Mile and the women groaning in the No-Tell Motel have equivalent importance to the ritualized mysteries of the solstice. For most of us, without words there is no way of living through this life, this world. *The Woman in Red* offers us assured and brilliant poems to sustain us. This book makes a big dent and no few scratches in the too-smooth familiar surfaces of current American poetry. These poems startle me; they enhance and excite my life. They force me to focus when I'd rather hide, but they also soothe and comfort me—even as the questions shift and whirl, and because they do.

Pamela Stewart
St. Ives, Cornwall
September, 1989

Burning Off The Past

isn't easy. And I wanted it
to be. I've given a number
of good years to prove it, but let's just say
I'm still hot. Perhaps you already know
the pattern: boy meets but she's really etc.
Frankly, I'm worried we're too dumb—
not to talk, I don't mean that—
and of course the philosophers who theorize
how women don't exist
have a point. We're the
first to admit that as science takes
out parts of our bodies, corruptible
one by one, we have our doubts
about staying embodied.
My sister, for example, uterine cavity
now immaculate—*But I'll always be
blessed*, she jokes. *The scars make a
cross—still needs to keep
her spirit like her house.*
No, I mean the ineffable matters
of here, the hear me, hear me of the guy
at the store who in reality
asks only for spare change, the
touch me, touch me of the stray
who followed us one night
loving along the river bank.
It was love but couldn't we
have saved ourselves along with him?
The man and the woman at dawn.
The woman like the man like the woman
who laughed herself
out of it, the it being
body. Being being.
I mean, how far do we have
to go? Long ago, a woman,
now dead, told me her lover
said, *Babywedontmakelovewemakeasymphony*
and if I believe the current

*

currents that harmony
still vibrates somewhere
and everywhere
I laugh converges eventually
with this place far away
which, if I extend my arms to horizon
and gather paradise, is palpable and near.

Little Nothings

Soft-tasting nibble vowels
seek a genuine
language but recover just
“the will and the power to say everything.”
“As long as we demand honesty”:
but how we I you speak to each
other. Has been a long time.
We’ve forgotten little things
that nevertheless, thoughtless, pop up: Read me
a story, the one where
the prince saves the princess but my niece
loses interest and suddenly
her finger before my nose.
Which knows the scent, familiar, uncanny, and
to pull back then to place it, think this
should be your uncle, sweet, or at least
your father, no? Still she wants me
to smell—what did she call it?—not
her wee-wee, the terribly wee girl-bud
(the wee we adults don’t talk about
with her) and her now self-
conscious aunt wonders what I can say how I might?
Smell my _____, she demands.
But I have already and desire
the child to wash her hands and return to
Why/Because/Oh. What’s normal.
But disrupts the mother in the unmother-
me. The unlover. We, you and I, whoever you are,
once sat sipping like this
a good beer. A good coffee.
The unspeaking scent.
The sense that nothing can say.

Rhapsody in Hand(s)

You held hands and I was there.
I was there, but my hands were in my lap.
You held hands in your mind.
You thought you held hands.
(Imagine holding the hands of the Chilean minstrel.
They were thrown away. You could not hold them.
What gets put back in its place.) My place
was not in your hands but I was there.

When we ate the apples on the fruit plate.
And if we got some money, you said.
But travelling light is not limiting
and one can, for example, buy oranges
and cashews from Mozambique where the starving
importunates travel but some people here
sell their produce in order
to get money there in the people's hands.

She said my mother holds the hand that can't
move cupped to the sky. I said my mother wrings
hers. After visiting my mother,
you wrung your hands for a week. You're becoming
my mother, I said. I'm becoming
my mother, she said. She waved her hand
before her face, which was a habit
and didn't dispel. She quoted her.

"We think back through our mothers."
A tall gaunt woman whose mother
"died of overwork easily at forty-nine."
But there was habit a leftover relic! Left behind,
she would stand at the door
waving until her brother rounded the corner.
"—a flutter of the dead hand
which lay beneath the surface of family life."

“All I do is work work work,”
my niece said, repeating her grandmother.
I am not afraid to go home.
My hands cup coffee mugs. Wash dishes.
Wring themselves. We think through our mothers.
“I am afraid to go home.” In the pictures,
Marianella’s hands are covered with small burns
from the cigarettes of the secret police.

I am my mother why won’t my hand move?
I said I’d be right back, but I was still there.

for Karen

Small Change

In the last year I could fit under your chin
(if I hunched up and you stretched your head back)
I rode your shoulders like a still small girl,
insisting you play, though time you spent home
shrank after you opened the place
we called "the restaurant" until a friend said
years later, Why your father's restaurant
is really a diner. "A diner," I repeated,

where all those nights you counted the day's take,
setting aside the silver coins and certificates
you'd keep in a cedar chest, laying away
your hopes to make it big.
Only your daughter was big, growing
like some out-of-control rubber plant,
some great western tree in upstate NY—
redwood, sycamore—
and by the time I was seventeen a wild
hothouse magnolia.

That year mother became unhappy,
your other daughters grew ungainly too,
and there was less and less reason
for you to come home,
I got my driver's license and my fake i.d.,
got into your silver which to me was
just the spare change you never had on you.

I'd drive past the diner after the bars closed,
see you ensconced in neon and venetian blinds,
and because you couldn't see out,
you felt no one could look in,
or wistfully watch you tallying
in your separate world the coins
you'd then hide like so many perfect
beloved children who grew
slowly, gracefully
fitting into even rows,
and with whom you always could play.

It's No Dream

At five I played
Maid Marian, and Robin Hood, dashing to save me,
nailed me instead
of the Sheriff with a shovel. It split my lip.

"X marks the spot,"
my sister teased until I shot up, Jack's beanstalk,
out of the scar.
Though I never grew out of the will to be saved.

When I got in
the stranger's car, at twenty, lost at dusk downtown
in Buffalo,
I knew only that I dared to. After all, he

had the address,
said he was selling weed to friends, and yes, what a
coincidence!
But after I realized I was in for it, scared

dumb still mind ran
along—see there's time play calm until . . . I made my-
self talk, and talk
and talk as he swung the car in wide arcs away from

where I was going.
Finally in an alley, we fought, my voice cut
off when I heard
him call—It's ok she's my girlfriend. Then falling

down under him
as the door slammed and bolt locked on the house of those
who'd come to see
what the racket was. In the end, I was too big

to beat. And was
free and found a phone. But police had their version
of my flimsy
descriptions of man and car, of the poor reasons

why I was there—
the angry squeeze getting back—for once the blood was
washed off, the eye
patched, the finger sewn up, I wasn't badly hurt.

Though now an X
marks me. The last time I was attacked, walking home
after a late
night shift of bad tips, I heard the car follow me

onto the dark
street where I lived. Three doors from home but my body
stayed running in
place. I cried, "You're tearing my coat," and when he said,

"Well nothing else
will tear if you come with me," I was finally
so tired I laughed.
Enraged, powerless, he pushed me in a snowbank.

"Happy now?" I
said. What could he do but go? I sat all night with
all the lights on
writing father, who received in the envelope

a piece of blank
paper. "What's this, honey?" he asked. "What did you mean?"
Only later
I knew, for in dreams, feelings of an old lover

came back. He'd say,
"It's all right because I am here now." I'd wake up
and, in the place
and the moment where I was, feel safe enough to

invoke myself, *It's not him and it's no dream.*

Landscape with Voice

Lilacs scented the air, delicate and aromatic
as the Rose of Sharon grandfather gave mother
before he died. On the long light evenings of midsummer
mother would look at the tall rose tree blooming
and recount the saga of how she forgot the plant
in Detroit while visiting a friend who potted it
and how a year later she came back never expecting
but there it was, a flourishing Rose of Sharon
which she then couldn't get through Canadian
Customs but somehow she talked them into letting her—
just a few hours' drive across, you know, and now
look at that plant who'd ever have thought it would take
over a year to bring it home when grandpa said,
Now I want you to have that, dear. But it was meant
to come, how it had thrived and how the rest of us
would edge off to play badminton and our fat white kitten Sam
leaped high as the net after the shuttle until the sun sank
and all you'd perceive was the dim rising and falling
of two white projectiles and one voice.

In Denmark Fish Can Sing

Old Ladies meet
in Denmark at konditoris
for coffee and cake.
I'd ride buses afternoons
with the old ladies of Copenhagen
who, after coffee,
would go home to their over-
stuffed furniture, turn-of-the-century
bric-a-brac and long
Havana cigars. Like these women I donned
black lambs' wool which I thought
so cool in the States
but no one under 80 wore in Denmark.
That Christmas when my grandmother
opened her box of Havana cigars
she thanked me well
for she'd heard they were costly
and could no longer
be bought in America.

Today I watch an old lady with her too-bright rouge,
her artfully dyed hair, her immaculate outfitting
of body and soul, sip coffee and nibble
a chocolate cupcake in the cafe in Tucson where
you and I discuss Stonehenge and the recent **Yoga Journal**
devoted to women. The old lady purses her lips and rounds
her eyes as she looks the place over like an ancient
5 year old—not self-conscious, not reading to cover
her aloneness.

I'm struck by her because this morning at the grocery
I'd followed out of curiosity two aged women
who had paid for a few modest meals
with food stamps, which have lately been so rare.
One woman was frailer, smaller, murmuring as the other—
still quite strong—pushed the cart, carried the bag.
They got into a shiny '55 Ford. Their dresses,
looking the same vintage, were ironed, maybe even
starched. When they drove off they broke into song.

So now when you tell me
the catfish and trout
you caught last week
talked as they
died, the catfish
chattering at you,
I remember how folk
always said the fish in Denmark
sing, how that is the real source
of Hans Christian Andersen's
famous tale, "The Little Mermaid."
My grandmother, on the other hand,
never smoked her Havana cigars
though she stored them
in her freezer along with
her 80th birthday cake
for two years.
Nevertheless, she sang beautifully
until a very old age
after which
she sang anyway.

Wolves and Tigers and Bears

Replaced, body sup-
planted by words larger and larger the words
grew but when body
still connected
spirit with sense we wolf cubs
ran to the grandfather
oak tree (the seer said Big Oak
follows you, I can see him just behind) hole
(whole) where his heart would be
if he lived but he lives there are leaves—
golden and rust—leaving him in fall.
And I'd watch him as I played
bear, wolf, now I'm a mountain lion
creeping one paw then the other
along forest floor. Moss, cool dirt, pads in snow,
deer flies in June but we wolves found
our voices and lost the capacity
to crouch.

What's this?

Who's there?

That day the band teacher spotted us in the school
auditorium during "independent study"
howling on our hands and knees down the aisles
(my friend had short hair, he thought her a boy
and us fooling around but we were)
two girls pretending to be wild
animals so we talked our way
out of trouble and back to the world our fathers made
us stay in . . . Until the last day senior year
we rode off on her Harley at the end of the sixties
after which acid eventually came to us
as rain and free love
as enterprise and words (man, cool)
words words sufficed
if only always imagined
in the place of the loony
moon wolves howled to, the way its light in woods
changed us.

The Seal Woman

There was a moment when
I thought I would go too.
I'd lived so long with my sisters
crooning to men on shore,
sometimes nuzzling those few
found afloat in our sea
back to motionless land.

At sunset, people would gather
to watch us lifting ourselves up on rocks,
our coats shivered with fire.
Then we'd dip back in,
draw as near as we dared,
and bob in the shallows
watching them too.

But this night I am alone.
I have seen how the strange calls of men
put limbs like their own
on my sisters, stripped their fur
to freezing white skin.
I've seen my two sisters
crawl out of the water

and look back at me with alien faces.
I tried to follow but they said,
in voices already altered,
*They gave you no name;
you must stay there.*
I waited to be named a long time.
Now I wait for my sisters.

Their hair is white
as their wrinkled hide.
They come down to the water to keen
for their lost skin
and for the one whose name
escapes them. But I've caught
their gaze and—dry so long—
their eyes fill with the sea.

Of Winter the Picture

Sky stretches through maple
and above the blue frozen lake
and black mound of hills
the sun flares fuchsia
in the photo you took the day
you left: the kind of montage
only the very distraught
come upon and are surprised
because they've stared blindly at the ground
so long some reflex urges them to look up.

Lost lover, old life, to you
I scratch notes that scatter in a space
where feelings still mark me
like a trail we tracked
together in woods. You taught me
to read the prints inscribed
on snow each morning
and which animals had made them
hunting at night—the lynx and wolf,
the owl who leaves no trail
but the tiny impress of a mouse-body
swept into air by its scruff.

Some neighbors always cursed dogs
they said ran deer down
and one of them finally took a gun to the pack,
felled our collie bitch.
By dusk I'd found the traces
of blood on snow, had reached
nothing that could, through the vanishing
light, be brought home.

I never told you
how terrifying and sadly twilight
came that day, how when I turned
to backtrack wind rushed high up
in trees that creaked and leaned
like old houses, how snow unfurled
off branches, filling my tracks,
and banks grew blue-shadowed
as I hunched over skis,

*

and finally the ice-stubbed lake
I rushed across to beat sunset
was so vast
the golds and reds
dissolved into night
before I reached the other side.

Years later I come upon
your picture tossed in a bureau drawer.
I trace the trees—their winter branches
fretting a skein of clouds
around the sun—
and still the heart
of whatever between us
that lies always undone.

Penelope's Tree

When I returned you sat in a crook of limbs
chipping bark off the tree
that should have cradled our marriage bed.
You swung on branches
you said you'd weave for us into a swinging hammock
but your arms are empty
and there's nothing your hands made while I was gone.

I still say you sent me to the ends of the earth
in search of beauty
and didn't I come back luminous with knowledge?
I was your voyager, after all.
And though you claim I've turned the story around,
I'm really trying
to tell your version, which I can't seem to remember.

In mine you've grown wooden—a stiff little fetish—
in a place desire
no longer enchants. The tree's arms are dying,
it is impossible
to embrace anymore and either I'm off or we must
make do like talking
spirits who recognize the foreigner in each other.

The Pool Shark, An American Fairytale

What she really wanted
was for her nails to curve
like waxing crescent moons
on the amber side of flesh tone.
But she sat filing them
into points again
which she'd paint blood-red this Friday
so they'd be shiny, unchipped,
and startling as she spread
her long fingers out on the green felt
of the pool table in Dizzy's
Not Ready For Prime Time Bar & Grill
just as the place was beginning to cook.

Her nails
clicked against the cue stick
while she waited between shots
but her aim on a good night
sank one ball after another
home. The boys were charmed
when she flubbed the break.
Then she'd blow them off the table
with a straight run when she got in.
She'd been taught the angles
by a WWII vet who met her shot for shot
of bourbon in Buffalo, and years later,
she learned her banks and top spins
from a Viet vet in Phoenix
who was crazy
to get into her pants, so she let him
teach her the gamut
until she'd polished her plays
to precision, then told him
she never mixed sex with the game—
on principle, he should understand.

But the ice light blue
of his eyes froze hard and she knew
where he'd learned the ropes,

*

knew he saw her nails now and flashed Saigon
razor vagina, jungle fireworks,
and the homeland's welcome home boys
royal screw over. She knew one night as
she'd be lining up the eight
he'd whisper—*That's the last
sucker that cue ball
bitch gonna sink.*
She'd turn around and before
everything would go stars
her nails would shine a wetter
hotter red as they scraped
red stripes down the flag of his white-hot face.

When she told her father,
he tried to beat
such devil's talk out of her.
But with herself she kept a pact
to fly forever.
Sometime later she was spotted,
her sleeping body seized
and burned as a witch.
So she retreated
 into the ozone
where she encountered Swedenborg's angels
waiting for him to doze off.
She became one of them
and disrupted her brother's sleep for life.
What choice, after all, had she left?

for Gillian

Watching the Sea, a Dream

A child wails—and in fingers
of raining clouds
across the bay
the airforce base disappears:
Thunder claps. A slat
of light widens on the sea
until we know the door's ajar
for a time. First the birds
hover to look in and down
the portal. They swoop,
dive, as boats scuttle to the threshold
through which the fishermen—
singly and in pairs—
begin to plunge.
We gather at windows
and onshore. Some
are starting to swim, the current
tugging them out further,
the door widening to meet them.
Then the beacon flashes across
and the surrounding grayness engulfs
all the light from sea:
The door surges back to a sliver
as if some underwater shock
were heaving it shut; we know then it is well
to move away from the scene,
pretend we saw nothing and knew
none who vanished.
We cradle our children who stare off
at the wrong place as if at
a disfiguring scar.

Witches

The game started when as girls
we snuck into our neighbor's garden
and played in their trees
until the two sisters we called witches
came out to shoo us home
and we ran through the gloom of fall.

Some of us would fall
and the older tended the younger girls
once we reached our hideout at home.
We pressed a garden
of knobs and buttons until the witches
left and again we climbed in their trees.

Then laden, the trees
cried with our cries as we'd fall
down into rhubarb we called Witches'
Sour that we crushed into the little girls'
hands to make them squeal. The garden
clung; we still winced at home.

*And back of their home
like bony crooked trees
snapping and swaying in an overrun garden
as if ready to fall,
the furious sisters rake girls
up like leaves in a heap which is*

*eternally piled for a witches'
bonfire. "My father built our home
before we were born and when girls
he bought us [white, fake, tiny] this tree,"
said the older sister one Christmas. "Here's fall's
only harvest—rhubarb jam from the garden."*

(It's guts from a body in the garden
because, I thought, they really *are* witches.
Invited alone I wondered, How did I fall
for the Cookies And Jam Come Into My Home
trick?) They had figures like trees.
Had they been touched since girls?

No fruit grows in the garden now or in the trees
where the witches first learned to fall,
but the unconsummated home remains they left as girls.

Ghost Town

When she lived in a country whose livelihood
was fishing, she stayed once in a village
at the end of a fjord. Mountains rose
to block the sun. There was only one hotel,
near the ghost part of a boomtown—
wharves, dwellings, hostels for fishermen
who had followed the herring away
years ago. Her room was over the main street.
Nothing was open
but an ice cream kiosk.
A man named Glacier
was telling about his afternoon, casting lines,
snatches of tales over the radio waves
like northern lights spanning a winter's
dark sky, though it was
recorded, the cashier said,
he'd been dead a long time.
He wrote plays, she added, he walked
into the sea.
He spoke an older, finer dialect
the woman only half understood
no matter how hard she listened.

That night she dreamed of grandmother
who insisted on telling her
the future—of good, then bad.
She cried *no more, please, no more*
and Amma said *then I won't*
be coming again.
Who'd want to know the future?
Yet in the end she was dead curious
for as her grandmother left
a waterwheel turned
(she could still hear its revolutions—
the creaks in ancient wood,
the green tang of water
as it spilled through
all seeming so real)
and she suddenly feared

*

that between wakings
all she loved might vanish,
everything for good.
Later, in the hotel café under neon,
she drank whiskey,
biding the night like faith
as if it were not there.

Sorrow

The women know about it. In my family
the grandmother having lived it all past seems serene
and is senile and the laughing daughters
when young mothers sitting in the yard at reunions
after the dinner dishes were put away
and the kids in bed, the husbands milling
around while the sisters drank and discussed whom
father loved best. We would sneak down
to hatch our next play and watch fireflies
zing beyond the front porch the laughing then
the crying floating—What are they *doing?*—
from the back yard until our mothers would hear us,
come with their mosquito lamps and
scurry us back to bed. But we'd sit up
whispering until the pieces of their voices
faded into the fan's whir—
they who so beautiful while we'd fall
into sleep grew with the years so sad.

And it's your guess as good
a time as could be had
when we all last got
a real spree, it was, together
they taught us to minimize
that old stuff, ourselves—taught us
to be nice but we were all
so strapping wild—*valkyries* they called
us once in Germany where they
romanticize size and blondes' eyes.
(In myth *choose-corpse*, choosers
of the slain in battle, can you
beat that? my sister said when I told her.)

The men wander
With their Manhattans and their beers, talking of what
to do. Uncle declaring he has found love at sixty
leaves. Grandfather confides in father—
House full of women, never said a thing
at home they thought was right
and father to son-
in-law: am always wrong here
wrong here I am
where I'll stay.

The cousins
women now though some of us—still play—
Our primadonna the banker, for instance, orders
two full meals at her favorite Italian restaurant,
drinks a bottle of red wash it all down so
she can talk again: Her mink hangs in Houston
because her husband in New York doesn't know she left him
for three months for another man or she would
show it to us. *I like a look of agony*
because I know it's true
for she fooled me,
pal together into the city
at fifteen to have
adventures couldn't see
through her. Bravo, *cossima*.
And so we all try
to rise back to the place where we knew
was wholeness, was light at the age before sorrow
carried our mothers and fathers out of our world.

for Doie, 1928–1987

Purgatory

And for the rest of the world
we practiced making good
rings, pictures, phrases, caresses—
anything we felt
could be perfected, completed
before time frayed.
But some things could not be improved.
How, for instance, could one
perfect “I love you” except perhaps
to learn to say it in every language
especially the very obscure
whose speakers were already
near extinction?

Or perfect
coupling except perhaps perfectly
to love everyone we’d ever loved
or everyone, or to love completely, assuming
it were the same as to couple.

That’s when we saw
we could never perfectly understand
and that practice did not
without question lead to perfect.

I stood under rain, the cool wash
refreshed. I took my lover’s
hands and raised them against
the light. I could see through them.
Anything that comes, he said.
Now we shall watch.

* * *

Not that I can see
who's watching, but when I walk
into stands of aspen and white spruce
to be alone I never am
(or remember why we came,
how we got here).

At night, a voice drones at us
disturbing our sleep, already restless
in our long rows of dorm beds
like graves.

But no one's sick,
I was told, only making amends.
I'm not on the inside of this place;
it has crept inside us who have forgotten
to ask for answers, like little bells
of forgiveness.

Yet a woman and I grasp
hands—it is something.

Now we have
only the memory of hands.
The air grows so close
sometimes my breath spirals up.
I'd laugh more often
at that oddness, how our forms
become shimmery and see-through as tropical
fish but we know this is serious.
Then hold your breath, I think.
And all of us think that later
comes the music and the play.

The Woman In Red

You might settle here
where if you did settle a red vase could be in your window
(but unwashed and without flowers because a hole in the vase
from an earlier crack-up you might have inherited. The vase
from a potter who went to Paris where she roams the Rue St.
Hélène on Sundays and pauses with her new lover for coffee and
toasted ham sandwiches they eat while even the cathedral “looks
damp and miserable today in the drizzle in the spring rain.”)
Where you did settle
the magnetic ions from cars shift and dance and rise to make
the orange-gold haze they say is dangerous was beautiful
at sunset once driving out of a city you watched the full
moon beam at the sun going down (It was another place you
definitely never thought of settling in) is beautiful and
risky as the women on billboards who smoke, who appear to smoke
and who laugh through the smokescreen who have no laugh lines
who cannot understand humor but who smile forever, who may be
real, somewhere beyond the camera but who never leave the picture.
You would like to be
dangerous like them. You are a dangerous woman but do they
tap your phone, speak softly in monotones like robots about what
you do? They could say Her house is unkempt, she spends her time
dreaming of danger and peace. She is consummately inconsequential.
Her life is a fishnet. She writes letters. She never bounces
back or takes lovers on rebound, on principle. She’s decomposing.
She is unsettling
before their eyes and says when they think she’s dreaming, “*natheless,*
syn I knowe youre delit, chese now” and they choose “the terribly
important small things” that bespeak a look they for no reason feel
desperation, betrayal, but is yet gorgeous and yes—nothing depends
on the red vase, the white mums she didn’t arrange, the curtains
she never hung, the bird of red wings tweeting loudly in the tree of
your yard’s scruffy spring.

You Wanted to Know

Something about her. You with your Vuarnets,
your Gargoyles convexly scooped
over crowsfeet that enrich your past.
You could be on a white
stretch of fabulous Greek beach or the black
lava wasteland that is, in Iceland, called
a beach.

Because you're watching, we do not
ourselves get to know about her—
what she looks like or what she thinks because
you picture yourself beside her, you see
how you look to others beside her.
You wanted, dear, to be very cool.
Indeed, you're impeccable. But in this world
there are people who say they love
you though you don't
have to believe them for all that,
what did your father call it,
malarky?

Mine would say weissenheimer,
You Weissenheimer, right out of The Honeymooners,
only he'd only say it when he hadn't
really listened and saying dispelled daydreaming.
We loved it for it meant he was
for a moment listening but we hated it
for my father would then poke us in the ribs
and we'd say, Oh Daddy, and stub
his foot and there we'd be, my father
like Reagan silent after his one joke.

Well I've left you,
surfing amongst the dolphins, who I dream
are in danger to awake and find they really are.
But you're cool while in your surf
the dolphins are leaping and beeping,
for now safe from nets and nuclear waste
though I'm sad and someday, I promise,
I'll tell you more about her.

Walking the Wasteland in Thule

Rusty with lichen, tufted with grass,
lava dolmens rise across the lake
where the tiny Odin's hen and eider ducks
raise their young in summer.
There's a stiff wind today,
bringing the scent of sulphur
through the fragrance of angelica, birch, and wild iris
that gives way
as we come in sight of the volcano
we climbed two years ago
a week before it erupted.

The slopes had turned amber, bright ochre,
orange and lavender. Everywhere was steaming,
billowing sulphur gas
through crack and fissure.
The earth rumbled and pulsed
with lava bulging beneath surface.
We got lost in the mist,
went further and further into the territory
we feared. When the mountain erupted,
ochre turned to gold, orange to molten red,
lavender to black shooting ash.
And incarnadined through smoke,
the full moon watched with you.

For it is not my memory but revering yours,
almost a dream that leads us back
to the place of devastation,
land that is again hot to the touch.
You say that somewhere up ahead
is a valley where no birds nest the lake,
no ancient basalt pierces the horizon,
but new pumice crumbles into sand
and only lambs' cress is sturdy enough
to sink roots.
We pass the warning sign.
This raw past we're walking toward
is like our own—molten flows

that effaced the known contours
to make another tenuous geography.
The wind pushes at us. *Go back.*
But we go on, losing each other in the mist
all over again. What we came to do
is walk the ineffable desert, a beginning
engraving its aftermath on our hearts,
inscribing a path
though blown away the moment
we step out of it.

The Suicide Sonnet

To be sad today and not to be able to
said at all. This disjuncture
of voice and memory, the something pure
like love past heat past letting know.

What was not done undoes when lovers face
each other's loss. But yelled at me
you never, no nothing you said you see
I am. I'd have liked to erase

the figure of the woman, with you to say
like Nietzsche that she was truth was
lies and circumstance and always as
I was not. I couldn't one way

or another imagine/you. What was your
harbor. Haven. Where you flowered for.

for Knud-Erik Holme Pedersen, 1953–1982

Voodoo (economics)

When there's time, you said, but you said
there's not time (and weren't you even slightly

? The girl turned to her friends. [*ready?*]
It's a fifties sort of place, she said,

really weird.
But they have great cakes).

Rolled up into nude like a ball an-
other girl. A glass table balanced on her.

She told how she didn't feel demeaned.
She was paid a lot for the picture they took.

"The fact of the matter" was repeated by all the men
on the show. But they meant different

facts—or matters. The topic was nothing
as abstract as truth or bestiality

(though one of them, maybe two, in another
life, had slept with the questionable).

So I was still trying to get at the heart of
their matters. These earthly

dissemblances. People whom, a movie star intones,
have chosen their fates an example of which

is at the bottom of a rubble-filled canyon:
two stray skulls, signs of an earlier

violence only partially exposed. The news reports
that daisies don't bloom in the eye sockets

but that socks are a problem in the shelters of the
homeless. There are (*gimme gimme gimme gimme*

shelter) none. That people are not warm they do not
come out as they were but that they are not dead but

“Changed beyond all recognition” (over & beyond
that there’s no family left to recognize them).

To get at the heart might matter if. But patience,
Augustine, is not its own reward. For instance.

I have waited allmylife for father
to buy a coffee mug with my name on it.

There were yellow roses above my name—
grandmother’s favorite flower who died recognizing

no one, remembering she’d had the grocery money
ready for grandfather when one day he pulled all

the tubes and spit at his weeping son, Leave me go.
Never shopped again, grandpa. On her car it read

Born To Shop. And, Shop Until You Drop. Bag it,
Bag man. With pants dropping he sat

in the far end of the subway car and pulled
his head inside his coat—and yes it was

a bit like a turtle—to sleep. (And what matter
that we sleep askew if fate is just

another four-letter word.) All the small kind-
nesses. She said she was well paid. And a hoary

though familiar face in the night’s fluorescenced
window, in the mirror in the rest home

the night nurse came upon her staring at:
the old woman turned then still surprised

to have seen an old woman.
But I’m still me, she said.

Never mind the night
nurse, who had just divorced,

crooned to herself,
you're still *You*

*remind me of a man. What man?
The man with the power. What power?*

*The power of voodoo. Who do?
You do. Do what?*

*Remind me of a man. What man?
The man with the power. What power?*

*The power of voodoo. Who do?
You do. Do what? Remind me—*

*Give up? "Have you ever seen anything like this
in your entire life?" the ad campaign read.*

"Buy this"

Desert Palimpsest

Century plants guard
the windows.
Light arrows through the shades.

From anywhere in town
you could still see
straight up to the Catalinas
in those days.

When I was a girl
they said I had the sight.
Old Father sweated
it out of me.
He told mother afterwards
"Do not worry,
she will not disgrace
the family now."

I have pictures on my wall.
I have a husband.

On the Miracle Mile Strip
the city cleaned up
the ghosts of chicanas in mascara
and honky women in skintight miniskirts
walk up and down all night.

"Behind the garden, behind the wall,
under the tree. . ."
Fool! There are
no trees here.

Though the No-Tell Motel
still takes the girls who turn tricks. . .
I guess you can't clean
it all up.

Later a spell
was placed on my family.
We didn't know why
our work was no good.

“There are no accidents,
only coincidence.”
Closure. Summer heat
awash over me.

“Well there’s a tall
drink of water.”
“Long tall Sally.”
“Hey, Joe, that’s not my name.”
“Not mine either.”

How can we be
present
when even sound in the air above us
distracts?
Control.
Concentrate.

Old Father had a vision:
Coyote
has been mischievous.
We gathered for the ritual
purification.

As the war revved up
they built hundreds
of little brick houses
for the munitions’ plant workers—
most of them women
left alone with their kids.
Man, those sticks and stone yards
looked like hell until the war ended
and there was no place but home
for the women again.

We walked into the hills
on the night of the longest day.
One by one we sat
on the stone marked
with the circle inside the circle.

But I play at thought.
At home. Home is where—
The heart exacts—
Extract yourself.
Ecstasy (from

The last desperado
was shot in the back
over a card game in 1911;
the last grizzly in 1912
over its yearly spring lamb.
He was very old
and wily at eluding the law
but they finally got him.

outside.
What is outside?
“It is like a new knowledge”
of grace.
The pursuit of happiness
distracts.)
I recall when life
with my lover
was magic.
Talk, talk,
he says now.

When my turn came to sit,
the sun between the angle
two peaks make
rose.
I was a woman
but the spirits had chosen
me to see.
This time we accepted
their gift.

The merchants on Miracle Mile
want to change the name
to Oracle.
Oracle what? Street?
Avenue?
Way?

Ecstasy, yourself:
What you call you
is a long way from your body
which you can observe
as down a long hall
and you think *I'm dying*
but that no longer scares you.
No. Here's another try:
You are beside your/self, by
yourself (or
"I am all alone here.")

Hex: "Infinite
capacity
for woe."

Bliss: "The fuchsia
is a bliss of sorrow."

Dichotomy: "it cannot
exist in language;
or perhaps:
in language alone:"

I called *Stop, stop,*
but it wasn't until later he defined
reality as dichotomous,
and much later that I dreamed
a little girl I didn't know
was having her fortune told.

Miracle Mile: the road where forever
a woman fakes a moan in bed.
Lover, she cries...

Now our baskets
are round again
and our shadows walk
in God's shadow.

I knelt down beside the fortune teller
who said fortunes
are inside knowledge—
nothing/ no one
outside.
(Love, she commenced.
Just love she said. “This world
is not Conclusion.”)
But I insisted
on knowing if
the girl’s future would be
felicitous.
What do you mean felicitous? she asked.

Second Sight

Ice of an older year
reaches the house before midnight
like clouds over the lake
and over the house.
They climb a worn spiral
of a staircase the people
who live in the house
who are tired and too
simple for their government.
Who haven't seen anything yet
see the clouds drained from
the lake's surface that lichen
over before first frost.

The fish couldn't breathe but fish
in this lake and anyway
what do you eat? Drink from it
and what do you imbibe?
When you offer no love your world
grows lined and laments. But the couple
in the house haven't seen anything
to see yet are insurgents of
sight offering myrtle-covered
paths, a rose or lilac bush, a
vine-covered arbor you walk through
into a garden where at bottom
fairies live as the woman
still sings to her children.

They are tired, they haven't
paid their taxes, they dance
like old men who dance with bombs abroad.
(Instead they stop
mid-sentence as if struck,
and cold. They comport themselves

*

with wisdom and little
lies. This is your changeling, your happy
governed folk, they sing. You're not
cold, are you my dears? in this country,
not for old men with the
power and the glory but for deer
approaching winter, crunching the tender
icicles hanging from the eaves of this fall-
ing down house where they see where.)

Good Love's Echo

Empty now—the place of echoing hills
where we slept under birch on the island
and I dreamed of a spirit cathedral and saw its
bishop. Now (the window left ajar, a thread
of sudden gold as the curtain lifts,
the figure of a green winged deer—
the wood spirit-carving you brought back from Bali
as a gift. I always wanted to conjure).
Airborne a falcon. Light strayed through
bamboo flanning out, a web we were inside of. A cat
appeared like a familiar weaving between us. The people
you said on the island speak only of the present—
spirits multiple in their households. We wanted
to stay forever walking along the watermarks. You
pressed your face to the cool flame in my palm.
The hour turned
the night over.
For awhile we urged
some sign. Anyway
it's superstition you said, the
intonations of our voices turning
to the water's lap as if the moment gone, the isolate
space of desire—like night—comes
round again. If we could push back the seams
of unseen edges. The wood carver you said thought
flying deer live only in America where we have magic
cowboy Reagans too and did not worry when you told
him there are none for he knew that here we see
no spirits. I stroke you distant
as I am from your territory.
My deer rises like a constellation.
Inside, the stillness we do not
know for sure and have no magic.

Meditation

We breathe in and are in
and surrender suffuses
resistance. Ourselves. Tallying the layers
of false love that drop off.
Until we're left
with. Something
specific, memory of mirage.
For after all, we live in a desert
whose central vortex
is somewhere up north. People
come here to. Come here, closer,
where man honors woman, man man woman
woman, but it doesn't begin to recover
the possible inandof between. Yes, our love
caretakes a huge desert garden.
Here man sees self and doesn't.
Where in the world he carries
like the large-eyed llama. Where enlightenment:
is homeless wandering struck
by nothing we give. Everything. Is not not this?
Not this.
Where in the world we walk.

Cynthia Hogue was born in Rock Island, Illinois, and grew up in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York. As a child, she wrote poems, stories, and, with her cousins, plays that they put on for many years at family reunions during the summer. While completing her B.A. in Comparative Literature at Oberlin College (1973), she began writing poetry seriously. She earned an M.A. in Arts and Humanities at SUNY/Buffalo (1975), and received a Fulbright Fellowship to Iceland (1980), where she studied and translated Scandinavian poetry and met her husband.

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