

# HOW THE BRAIN GREW BACK ITS OWN HISTORY

by

ELIZABETH WEBSTER BEASLEY

(Under the Direction of T. R. Hummer)

## ABSTRACT

The introduction explores issues of obsession, diction, argument, abstraction, and the via negativa in poetry. The essay defends the notion of the generic lyric, as practiced by Rilke, Dickinson, and Plath, and argues that, while part of the tradition of the Romantics and the Imagists, the contemporary generic lyric is able to reinvent itself in surprising and compelling ways. *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History* consists of short, image-driven lyrics whose central theme is the body. The collection uses the cellular process of death and regeneration to tell a kind of creation story.

INDEX WORDS: Generic lyric, Lyrics, Abstraction, Via negativa, Rilke, Dickinson, Plath, Romantics, Imagists, Brain, Body, Death, Regeneration, Creation story

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005

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August 2005

## DEDICATION

For the memory of my father, James L. Beasley (1948—2004)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*AGNI Online*: “The Pear”

*Alaska Quarterly Review*: “Eve”

*Epoch*: “Seven Years”

*Green Mountains Review*: “Other Gardens” and “Love, a Bird Passing Over”

*Hotel Amerika*: “Hippocampus”

*Permafrost*: “Flashlight Fish”

*Phoebe*: “Harder Than This”

*Pleiades*: “Eden”

*Poetry*: “Snakeskin”

*Sonora Review*: “Dark Horse”

I would like to thank my committee, especially T. R. Hummer, for their time and careful attention. I would also like to thank family, friends, editors, and teachers whose support and encouragement has meant a great deal to me, especially Charles Brower, Vallie Kirkland, Nancy McCabe, George Looney, Neil Shepard, Kevin Prufer, Joseph Parisi, and Sven Birkerts.

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## INTRODUCTION: HOW THE BRAIN GREW BACK ITS OWN HISTORY

### I.

Assembling a poetics is a daunting task. It would be easier if I could say “I’m a New Formalist” or “I’m a Language Poet,” though I don’t put myself in any camp. Writing for me is a deeply personal act that involves solitude and intuition, and I trust Rilke’s advice in *Letters to a Young Poet*: “There is only one single way. Go into yourself... Then try, like some first human being, to say what you see and experience and love and lose” (18–19). In making a poem, I arrange and rearrange lines and images until they please me, or until they surprise me in some way. Though I frequently return to the same themes, to the body, to loss, I am never actively pursuing these things—it is only that they work themselves in. In this way I consider myself a private poet, in Richard Hugo’s sense of the word, fueled by my own obsessions:

If you are a private poet, then your vocabulary is limited by your obsessions. It doesn’t bother me that the word “stone” appears more than thirty times in my third book, or that “wind” and “gray” appear over and over in my poems to the disdain of some reviewers. If I didn’t use them that often I’d be lying about my feelings, and I consider that unforgivable. In fact, most poets write the same poem over and over (*The Triggering Town* 15).

In *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History*, the word *body* (or *bodies*) appears twenty-five times. And it seems as if I have written a kind of creation story.

I did not intend this.

But a private poet, of course, does not stand outside of the poetic tradition, and I will attempt here to discuss some of the poets who have mattered to me. I hope to reveal some of my aims in writing individual poems as well as in assembling this collection as a whole.

## II.

**general:** ...*being usu. the case; true or applicable in most instances. Not limited in scope, area, or application. Not limited to or dealing with one class of things; diversified. Involving only the main features rather than precise details...*

**Syns:** *general, common, generic, universal.*

--The American Heritage College Dictionary

While there are occasional gulls, hawks, or magnolias in my poetry, more often there are simply “birds” and “flowers.” It is the generic, elemental quality that I’m drawn to. I have always loved the poems of Rilke and Dickinson in part because they escape a particular time and place; instead of being caught inside history, they are nearly flung out of it. Rilke’s “The Panther” makes use of generic language like “vision,” “image,” and “world,” and aside from the note that follows the title “In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris,” the presence of the place, the year, and the poet himself are erased from the lyric. The panther “paces in cramped circles,” and it seems “to him there are / a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.” Through “the curtain of the pupils...an image enters in, / rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles, / plunges into the heart and is gone.” “The Panther” could have been written yesterday, following an afternoon trip to the zoo, or one hundred years ago, when it was actually published in *New Poems* in 1907. Rilke works with a timeless, “universal” diction in the *Duino Elegies*, referring to angels, humans, lovers, nature, voices, death, and eternity. Like Rilke’s, Dickinson’s poems are constructed out of the generic vocabulary of heaven, death, silence, wing, wind, and sight.

Dickinson's poems always feel timeless and relevant: "'Tis not that Dying hurts us so—/ 'Tis living—hurts us more—/ But Dying—is a different way—/ A Kind behind the door—."

Reading Dickinson and Rilke, I always feel that I am invited into the poem, in part because many of the details, and the personality of the poet, have been extracted. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* Scott McCloud explains why comics or cartoons are effective: "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30). McCloud writes, "The fact your mind is capable of taking a circle, two dots and a line and turning them into a face is nothing short of incredible!" (31). He then explains the difference between a realistic, detailed image and a more generic one, saying that "when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon*—you see *yourself*" (36). I don't mean to suggest that I want to write "cartoonish" poems, but I do think McCloud's distinction is useful in thinking about poetry, especially in thinking about a poet like Dickinson alongside narrative and post-confessional poets. The following is an excerpt from Denise Duhamel's poem "Incest Taboo":

I was changing my bathing suit at the beach  
house my parents rented. It was a parrot  
green one-piece with a yellow swoop  
of daisies down the front. It was wrong  
the way my brother Fred barged in—the bird  
brain—without knocking, his voice exploding,  
"The drive-in starts in two minutes!" He hovered,  
my suit rolled down to my hips. "Mommy

wants you to hurry up,” he said, leering. The hum  
 of a car engine out front, my father  
 honking. Then Fred backed away.

Duhamel’s poem is a realistic and detailed narrative that makes use of dialogue. In fact, if it weren’t for the line breaks, this could easily be a paragraph in a novel or short story. Rather than the generic “film” or “movie” we have “the drive-in.” Instead of “suit” we get the image of “a parrot green one-piece.” Though this poem is not without charm, and manages to be both funny and disturbing while it tackles a difficult subject, for me the detail and the personality of the poet are overwhelming. Of course, “Incest Taboo” isn’t unconcerned with what is essential or “universal”; it hopes to use the personal as a means of illuminating the universal. Still, as a reader, I feel distanced from the poem. I see “the face of another,” in McCloud’s terms, and I simply don’t care what kind of bathing suit the speaker is wearing.

Of course, the danger of using “generic” language is that it can become simply conventional, “poetic” diction. In other words, Hugo’s sense of a vocabulary “limited by obsessions” could just be a kind of habit, of recycling the language of the poetry of the past. Nearly thirty years ago, Robert Pinsky was concerned with the Romantic and Modern traditions and their influence on contemporary poetry, and the diction “associated most, perhaps, with W. S. Merwin: ‘silence’ and ‘light’ and ‘water’ and ‘breath’...flowing, particulate substances, shapeless and pure and, most of all, tacit” (83). For Pinsky in *The Situation of Poetry*, this generic diction works well in the poems of Charles Wright, where “the locale tends toward the generic and the inward. The point of view is correspondingly unspecified, establishing a theater for the poem rather like that of many by Stevens...All of this allows the poet to use, as in ‘Northanger Ridge,’ a wide range of surreal or ‘deep’ figurative language, a free bardic roaming

for metaphor” (116). At other times, though, Pinsky sees nonspecific terms as empty and trite, as in Robert Bly’s poem “Driving toward the Lac Qui Parle River,” which contains the lines “The stubble field catches the last growth of sun. / The soybeans are breathing on all sides.” Pinsky compares Bly’s poem unfavorably to the work of Elizabeth Bishop:

This drifts from uncertainty into boastfulness, a kind of more-imagistic-than-thou attitude. Moreover, “growth,” “breathing,” and the generic plural of “old men” are unlikely and “poetic”—more for tone than for information. If Bishop tells us surprisingly much in a quiet voice resembling speech, these lines about the dusk, the moon, and the soybeans tell us surprisingly little in a voice of mysterious, bardic hush (77).

It’s not entirely clear what makes Wright’s poems more successful for Pinsky than Bly’s, though he calls Bly’s approach “naïve” while claiming that Wright, by capitalizing “mock-allegorical phrases” like “the long, long waters of What’s Left” or “Whatever Will Come,” has an awareness of the “mannerism” that “often threatens Wright’s poems” (115).

Recently I encountered Alice Fulton’s description of the contemporary “generic” lyric in *Feeling as a Foreign Language*:

The generic lyric—in which readers are denied even the salacious, spying pleasures of narrative—draws on the day-old vocabulary of *angel*, *wild*, *sweet*, *dark*, and *desire*. Diligently troping through prefabricated landscapes of loss, these elegies are here to tell us—and tell us—that “absence is presence.” That formulaic phrase seems all too apt. Poets lip-sync old hits—“Dark Angel,” “Wild Desire,” “Sweet Wings”—that once upon a long ago had life (283).

And of course I wonder, “Am I writing a generic lyric?” Though I see Fulton’s point, and agree with her in part, what she is objecting to must be something other than diction alone. According

to her logic here, she would dismiss many wonderful works of art, including Wim Wenders's beautiful film *Wings of Desire*. If the limits of our language are the limits of our world, what would it mean to remove the word "desire" from our vocabulary?

## II.

*It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for last...No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground.*

--Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes"

Like Frost, what I most want from a poem is surprise. I feel a kinship with Robert Bly's concept of "leaping poetry," when the poem leaps from the conscious to the unconscious and moves by associations. My favorite moments in *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History* are these leaps, when the cloth becomes "the inner ear, saying where the sea is," or when the skin from a pear "could be any set of stairs." I find constant surprises in the work of Sylvia Plath, a poet I much admire. Plath's poems move so quickly, and unexpectedly, stacking images and metaphors, as in "Cut," where the thumb becomes a hat, a pilgrim, a "turkey wattle," and then a gap where "a million soldiers run, / Redcoats, every one." A poem like "Sheep in Fog" seems to be held together by tone, and there's never a clear connection between the lines, between "The hills step off into whiteness" and "People or stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them." Often my poems employ a similar structure. In "Autonomous," for instance, the poem moves from sleep, to the heart, to animals at a gate, to the sea, and back to the body. The poem moves quickly and doesn't provide explanations or connective tissue between lines and images.

Rilke and James Wright also create a kind of leaping poetry. The last line from one of my favorite poems, Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," takes us entirely by surprise. We are ripped away from the statue and the world of observation, and a voice suddenly speaks to us, the reader: "You must change your life." In a similar way, James Wright's poem "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" ends with a surprising statement, and the jump between the first twelve lines and the last, "I have wasted my life," is immense. The poem consists of natural images, and the speaker seems calm and content while observing the world around him. The world seems beautiful; even "The droppings of last year's horses / Blaze up into golden stones." But the last line expresses a lovely ambiguity. It is possible that "I have wasted my life" reveals a kind of joy or acceptance that all life ends or is essentially "wasted." But the joy is tainted by despair as well, as "the evening darkens" and the hawk "floats over, looking for home."

### III.

*Don't be 'viewy'—leave that to the writers of pretty little philosophic essays.*  
 --Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect"

What I'm drawn to in Rilke and Wright's poems are the kind of arguments they make, and the arguments in "Archaic Torso" and "Lying in a Hammock" seem to hinge on emotion rather than logic. My sense of a poem's argument has evolved over time, moving away from statements like Charles Olson's: "Poems should be more like essays and essays should be more like poems." As an example, I'd like to include an earlier draft of "Seven Years," the first poem in *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History*, followed by the revision:



## Seven Years

The body renews itself completely:

Skin and hair, blood and toes, eyes and bone.

Every part grows again into what it was.

You can see some of it happening:

You remember being a child, placing a tooth  
under your pillow, and feeling the smooth gum  
with your finger until it caught an ivory stump,  
a tree in your mouth. You will cut your fingernails  
and watch them grow back the next week.

It is change you can watch, the way  
sand smoothes over by morning,  
how it looks different than it did at night,  
when you kicked a half-washed castle  
and wrote your name with your toe at the water.

But mostly, it happens quietly, without us.

Voice box, larynx, vocal cords strip  
themselves, fall apart and grow again  
while you are singing, unsuspecting.

What can you trust if not your hands  
and ears, your spine catching drops of rain,

your eyes adjusting to the dark of a room?

The body is the only familiar land, your knees

two stones where you sit and think.

Yet it happens, suddenly.

Looking through old letters in the back

of the closet, you notice your handwriting

has changed, even the way you sign your name.

Your friends begin to call less and less.

You try to teach yourself Spanish.

The man you love starts your car and waves goodbye.

He says, *Can you blame me?*

*I have grown a new heart.*

And so he has, and so have you.

At night you listen to it pumping.

You've heard stories of transplants,

the rejected hearts, something in the muscle or blood

that shuts down and asks through the veins

*stranger, where are you from?* So you must hold it,

warm and beating time inside of you where you can't

see it changing color, getting larger or smaller, or tired.

You teach the new heart the old heart's stories. It listens.

You wonder how the brain grew back its own history.

## Seven Years

At night you listen to it pumping.

You've heard stories of transplants,  
the rejected hearts, something in the muscle or blood

that shuts down and asks through the veins  
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see it changing color, getting larger or smaller, or tired.

You teach the new heart the old heart's stories. It listens.

You wonder how the brain grew back its own history.

It strikes me that the first poem follows the structure of a persuasive essay, though instead of the standard five paragraphs, it contains five stanzas: the first stanza presents a thesis, the next three stanzas provide evidence or examples to prove the argument, and the last stanza serves as a conclusion. In the revision, though, the poem begins suddenly, in the middle of things, without the preparation of a line like, "The body renews itself completely" or "Every part grows again into what it was." What "it" refers to isn't completely clear until the third line. The first poem moves through the entire body, from teeth, fingernails, and vocal cords to the spine, the knees, and the heart, and so the presence of the brain in the last line feels like a logical end to the

catalog of organs and bones. Because the revised poem focuses on the heart, however, the last line is jarring and unexpected, and the leap between the heart and the brain becomes more pronounced.

In the most recent poems in *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History*, I have relied on sound more than argument. For example, in “Portraits in Absentia” I was moving by sound at the end of the first section: “I was sure, then, that you would die. // Only the whale’s heart / is large enough to walk inside.” I was drawn to the rhyme of “die” and “inside” and compelled by the strange appearance of a whale’s heart in a poem about my father. In other poems, like “But You Are Not a Star,” the connection between lines is oblique, but I was again led by repetitions and sound: “Pulse, pulse. // You hold up another mirror in front of the first.” The longer poems in the collection, like “Hippocampus” and “Other Gardens,” make their “arguments” through collage and juxtaposition instead of logical reasoning, and I’m increasingly drawn to looser and more unhinged structures in my poetry.

I have learned from a number of poets whose poems are held together by language. The strange, fierce lyrics of Larissa Szporluk are mesmerizing, though I’d be hard-pressed to say what they are “about.” Often lines like “Her vowels went dark. / Her body rowed back” have a parallel structure, while others seem chosen for their sounds and syllables: “*Don’t cry. Be warm. Watch how.*” Though I have become less interested in proving an argument in my poems, the poems still contain rhetoric. In fact, many lines in the collection could serve as “thesis statements” for the book as a whole: “All day I’m giving a name / for what isn’t there,” “the body was more a distant / occasion than a real thing to love,” or “Still we had to sing, to see how / things would get along without us.” Some of the poems end with an assertion, or a kind of “wisdom line,” that seems to arrive out of nowhere. “Autonomous” ends “And even then you

won't be alone with your body." But how is that the logical "conclusion" for what has come before?

#### IV.

*Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol. Go in fear of abstractions.*

--Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect"

*No ideas but in things.*

--William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

I admire much in the poetry of H.D., Pound, and Williams. Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" still dazzles me with its compression and metaphor, with the leap between the first line and the second, and I love the simplicity and brevity of a Williams poem like "This Is Just to Say." In my own poems, like "Love, a Bird Passing Over" and "Walls Are the Last Beginning," I have experimented with compression, working to see how small a poem could be and still be interesting. How much can I take out before the poem disappears? Certainly I owe a debt to H.D., and I find echoes of "Garden" and "Sea Violet" in many of my own poems, specifically "Other Gardens" and "Aurelia Aurita." Looking again at H.D.'s *The Walls Do Not Fall* and *Tribute to the Angels* I see countless images that appear in *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History*, including the sea, shells, flowers, and even "the octopus-darkness," "the whale" that "can not digest me," and "the new Eve who comes / clearly to return." Many of H.D.'s poems contain questions: "we passed the flame: we wonder / what saved us? what for?" Questions are important in *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History* as well, and the first poem in the first section asks, "Is this what you wanted?" Often the poems end with a question or a dash,

implying that there is something unfinished about them, that they are only part of a voice or thought, and they resist, somewhat, Frost's claim that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom."

I'm not satisfied with images alone, however. It is interesting to look at one of the purported aims of Imagism presented in Amy Lowell's preface to *Some Imagist Poets*: "To produce a poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite." Yet H.D.'s poem "Oread" is intriguing because of its blurriness, as the sea turns into "pointed pines" and "pools of fir." There isn't much that's definite about the poem; it's also possible to see the trees turning into the sea. Brendan Jackson writes that "F. S. Flint in the *Egoist* referred to the poem as 'PINES,' clearly believing that it speaks of pines, imaged as a green sea. . . Pound, however, appears to have read the poem differently . . . 'H.D.'s' waves like pine tops.'"

*Blurriness* is a good word, I think, to describe what I've wanted to accomplish lately, just as things are "blurred the way water sees" in "Mediation." I want to create a more abstracted space than someone like Elizabeth Bishop, with her patient, detailed, exacting eye:

The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs  
 and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up  
 to storerooms in the gables  
 for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.  
 All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,  
 swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,  
 is opaque, but the silver of the benches,  
 the lobster pots, and masts, scattered  
 among the wild jagged rocks...

Bishop's poems sometimes turn to abstraction as well, but it takes her a long time to arrive there. "At the Fishhouses" is grounded in the physical world; a man smokes a Lucky Strike while the speaker thinks of Baptist hymns and notices a seal in the water. But after imagining dipping her hand into the sea, "as if the water were a transmutation of fire," the speaker's thoughts move beyond the physical world and into a meditation on knowledge:

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
 drawn from the cold hard mouth  
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Bishop's "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" also ends in abstraction in the last stanza, with "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and,'" and the final image of the travelers who "looked and looked our infant sight away," but not before the poem presents a lengthy and specific account of "the Narrows at St. Johns," Dingle harbor, the poppies at Volubilis, and the jukebox playing "Ay, Jalisco!" in Mexico. While Bishop's abstractions often work as final gestures, I have become more interested in abstraction as the first gesture of a poem, just as "Blue Vase" begins, "In spite of the greater brightness, / the blue dominates, which is more / than a local color."

In "At the Fishhouses" and in Bishop's work generally, the long act of looking becomes the subject of the poems. But my poems don't look for long—they thrive on a kind of suddenness. While a poem might begin in the real world, it quickly inhabits a place that's vague, abstract, foggy. "Dark Horse," for instance, begins with "Two gulls," something that the eye is

able to imagine. The next image, “dull coast,” is less precise, while the next phrase, “like someone’s / dream was here, constructing itself / with rocks” creates a purely imaginative space, a place that doesn’t exist in the real world. I’m attracted to this kind of impossible place, which is also found in “Vestigial”: “And the rumor of the brain, its dark, / unused spaces—that once we needed // a place we could never go.” And it’s the world that’s being created in “Other Gardens,” where meaning has “no place to attach / itself” and “A woman says *beautiful*, / looking at nothing.”

As a whole, *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History* seems to want to balance the physical world with abstraction. The last line of “Optical Illusion” reads: “And I can’t tell / if I could put my life in it, or flowers.” Similarly, “Radiograph” ends with this juxtaposition: “your grief, your paper flowers.” Both Stevens and Dickinson integrate description and abstraction, creating worlds that are both cerebral and lush. What is perhaps Wallace Stevens’s most famous poem, “The Snow Man,” begins with the abstract “mind of winter” but then places the reader distinctly in the sensual world of observation, with the “boughs / of the pine-trees crusted with snow” and “the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter // Of the January sun.” The poem returns, though, to the mind and to the abstract, to “misery” and the “same bare place,” until the listener “beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” The poem is arresting and gorgeous as it shows us the trees in a winter scene and then asks us to see what cannot be seen.

Dickinson masters this kind of abstract poetics, constantly placing the tangible and the intangible side by side: “We outgrow love, like other things / And put it in the Drawer—” (#887). Here Dickinson begins with an abstraction—an emotion—and turns it into a physical object, an article of clothing that can be easily moved or discarded. James Longenbach



comments on the lines “The Capsule of the Wind / The Capsule of the Mind” from “Best Things Dwell Out of Sight” in *The Resistance to Poetry*: “Yet the poem is thrilling because the point of these metaphors remains partially occluded: the metaphors oscillate between allowing us to picture an image (the body) and tempting us with the unpicturable (the wind’s container)” (7).

Many of Dickinson’s poems are enchanting because of the lack of specific detail—it’s impossible to see an actual image or event. Poem # 559 begins “It knew no Medicine— / It was not Sickness—then—” and then attempts to describe some sort of event or transformation, perhaps even a near-death experience. Yet “it” remains unclear, and the description that follows is equally vague: “It left the little Tint / That never had a Name— / You’ve seen it on a Cast’s face— / Was Paradise—to blame—.” How can we see this “little tint” that can’t be named or described? The poem “I’ve Seen a Dying Eye” serves as an *ars poetica* for Dickinson, I think, as the eye “Then Cloudier become— / And then—obscure with Fog— / And then—be soldered down / Without disclosing what it be / ’Twere blessed to have seen—.” Dickinson continues to be an important influence for me. I see her vague “it” as “The Pear” begins, “It is the new dream.” And I, too, have grown enamored of the dash.

## V.

The first section of the manuscript, “The Sounds of Our Bodies Are Deafening,” brings the reader into the world of the body. While all of the poems are highly visual and image-driven, this is especially important in the first section. “Spell” asks, “Why did we look, then,” and the poems often turn on the act of sight and end in a gesture of looking. These early poems meditate on the daguerreotype and photography, the x-ray, and a picture of an optical illusion. The idea of an Eden or paradise is presented as well in “Wishbone” with “I imagine I touch / the first rib,”

and there is an emphasis on first things, with “the first picture” in “Daguerreotype” and “our first love” in “Vestigial.” The first poem in the middle section, “The Pear,” begins “It is the new dream,” and there is a sense of a world being created. Suddenly there are fruits (the pear, the pomegranate), horses, sea creatures (jellyfish, octopus, starfish), and the poems “Eden” and “Eve.” The last poem in the section, “Other Gardens,” begins, “They had not yet made shapes / between the stars,” but the first poem in the next section declares, “this place is built.”

But the world that has been forming starts to empty out and disappear in the third section, “In Absentia”; a horse only leaves “its shadow-shape” and the poems focus on empty space, on “the hollows / of the soft, bare trees.” “Portraits in Absentia,” the last poem, comments on the project of the collection. Most of the poems pay attention to both what is seen and what is not seen. With the flashlight fish “we cannot see the fish’s small, / black body,” the jellyfish has “no kind of eyes,” and a flower believes “if it cannot see, / it cannot be seen.” Only death is the place “where you could look long / and forever.” While the first section is highly sensory and begins and ends with listening to the ocean, even the senses start to degenerate in “Other Gardens”; the starfish is a “mute hand,” the atrium and ventricle are “mute twins in the heart,” and “Other Gardens” asks, “What did the body know / of minutes, being blind?” Rather than announcing a space, the poems seem to announce an empty space instead, just as “Optical Illusion” declares: “Sometimes the people disappear.” It seems fitting that the last poem proclaims “I had never even hung any pictures.” Empty space wins out in the end, until “there was nothing more to see.”

The title, *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History*, sounds to me like a creation story, like a fable or a tale from Kipling’s *Just So Stories*: “How the Whale Got His Throat” or “How the Leopard Got His Spots.” The title is misleading, in a sense, because it implies a narrative, perhaps even a chatty one. Of course, the poems that follow are lyrics, and short ones at that,

and the long title doesn't predict or prepare the reader for the short titles of the poems ("Spell," "Eve," "Exile," "Interior.") Still, the title works for me on a number of levels. Most importantly, it focuses attention on the body, which is the central theme or subject of the collection. The poems want the world and the body to have a correspondence. The cloth in a still life transforms into "some human figure" and finally "the inner ear" in "Blue Vase." A conch shell is "like bodies I had known." "The Breath the Hinge" asks this question directly: "if we are / a mirror of nature, or if nature / mirrors us." While some of the poems suggest a harmony between the self and the world, others have trouble finding an easy correlation between them. "Corpus Callosum" claims, "Still the world does not match its scent," and the speaker in "But You Are Not a Star" wishes that emotions "made shapes— / a belt, a dog, or sisters."

The title is taken from the first poem, "Seven Years," which presents the idea that every seven years our bodies are replaced—cells are always destroying themselves and regenerating. Reading the poems in *How the Brain Grew Back Its Own History* is like seeing cellular memories replace themselves, where something is created and then destroyed. In "Snakeskin" a cloud becomes a hawk pulling an abacus behind it, then a spine, then a snakeskin. Once this image is formed, though, it's gone—the skin only "remembers what it once held." Content and form work together in this way, as many of the same words are recycled and "regenerated" into a new poem. The sky, birds, and stars in "Ithaca" appear again in the following poem, "But You Are Not a Star," in a new configuration.

## VI.

*Make it new.*

--Ezra Pound

*No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.*

--T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

I find the presence of other poets everywhere in my work. I see the influence of the Romantics, especially in my use of the pathetic fallacy, or giving human emotions to nature, in poems like "Starfish" and "Subjectivity," which continue in the tradition of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Blake's "The Sick Rose," Marianne Moore's "An Octopus" and "To a Snail," Bishop's "The Fish," Sexton's bestiary poems, and Louise Gluck's *The Wild Iris*. A poetry of the body is nothing new, either; Dickinson sought connections between the body and the larger world, saying "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" and "The Brain is deeper than the sea—." In Charles Wright's "Stray Paragraphs in April, Year of the Rat," "two cardinals" become "two blood clots, / Cast loose in the cold, invisible arteries of the air," while Charles Simic imagines a thumb as the "loose tooth of a horse" in "Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand." Jane Hirshfield devotes an entire chapter, "Two Secrets: On Poetry's Inward and Outward Looking," in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* to poetry's long project of connecting inner and outer worlds. Hirshfield writes, "Poets throughout history have turned to animal and mineral being to express their own because from that storehouse a larger vocabulary of being, particularity, and wisdom can emerge" (134).

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" T. S. Eliot argues that, essentially, tradition is synonymous with talent: "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their

immortality most vigorously.” Eliot continues, “Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, ‘tradition’ should positively be discouraged.” Yet what is the difference between absorbing tradition and finding the necessary “historical sense”?

A few years ago I taught a course on “The Literature of Love and Death.” I argued that love and death were, essentially, the only two things people really cared about, and that there were endless permutations of these themes in our poems, plays, essays, and novels. I still believe this is true, and I am unable to avoid these subjects simply because they might be “old hits.” I wrote “Dark Horse,” and a number of other poems like “The Elephant in the Room,” “Heart of Gold,” and “Freudian Slip,” which are not part of my collection, as an attempt to rework clichés and to see if tired phrases might be given new life if they were given a new context. I hope I have succeeded, and that I have found a way for the new heart to learn “the old heart’s stories.”

In *The Triggering Town* Richard Hugo writes that “if you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self” (7). While the heart is arguably the most overused metaphor in the history of poetry, it is an image that always returns to me in my writing, and the word appears in the collection eleven times. I have tried to use the figure of the heart in unexpected ways, so that readers are asked to imagine, for instance, someone walking inside a whale’s heart and trying to hang pictures on its walls. For me the poems have an emotional center but escape, if sometimes narrowly, sentimentality. I respond to the emotional content in other poets and even songwriters, like Joni Mitchell’s metaphor: “Her heart is full and hollow / like a cactus tree.” What seems almost sappy at first becomes, for me, a new way to imagine love, suffering an intense heat in the desert.

The shape, the form, the pattern—all unchanged and yet not one single molecule of what was you seven years ago is part of you now. What do you want? Eternal permanence?

—Joan Brady  
*Theory of War*

At times the mirror increases a thing's value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored. The twin cities are not equal...The two Valdradas live for each other, their eyes interlocked; but there is no love between them.

—Italo Calvino  
*Invisible Cities*

## Seven Years

At night you listen to it pumping.

You've heard stories of transplants,  
the rejected hearts, something in the muscle or blood

that shuts down and asks through the veins  
*stranger, where are you from?* So you must hold it,

warm and beating time inside of you where you can't  
see it changing color, getting larger or smaller, or tired.

You teach the new heart the old heart's stories. It listens.  
You wonder how the brain grew back its own history.

## **1. The Sounds of Our Bodies Are Deafening**



## The Sounds of Our Bodies Are Deafening

What we call loneliness must be  
only a longer waiting, a different silence.

Like the woman listening to the ocean,  
listless from its roaring, all things

smoothed over and pleased. The dog  
barking at the sky's colors, crabs

scuttling over the sand, the music  
of a bruised fruit. Nothing startled or broken.

Is this what you wanted?

## Blood Can Be Nothing but Red

It only takes a small wound  
to begin the idea of a place before,  
a night sky curled in the vein,  
blue like a heart completely  
itself, not given over,  
stars always in the same place.

## Wishbone

My mother calls it the pulley  
bone, the wheel and rope,  
a heaviness to be lifted, a shifting  
of weight. Forked like veins  
beneath the wrist, the smallest river  
running out. In our hands,  
what once framed the breast  
of the bird, fusion of clavicles,  
the dream of frozen ground  
and feathers. I imagine I touch  
the first rib. My wish: to invent  
again a woman. The snap, the sound  
of my dark heart, its beating wings.

Vestigial

And the body began with this nostalgia—  
restless, permanent—

wisdom teeth, stunted tailbone,  
fold in the inner corner of the eye—

*plica semilunaris*, part moon.

The organs like ruins and something  
to grieve over—the winged birds

who cannot fly—

And the rumor of the brain, its dark,  
unused spaces—that once we needed

a place we could never go—our first love,  
hypnotic and still, *how we sang to it*,

lured it to grow closer, larger, inside ourselves—

## Radiograph

The body is simply black and white,  
the hard bones wispy, a strange fog  
where the spine begins,  
a place for a story you'd tell in the dark.  
As if you could blow softly  
and make a new arrangement—  
your grief, your paper flowers.

## Daguerreotype

The first picture: revealed  
in mercury vapors,  
an accident of broken thermometers,  
a city that could only be seen  
in a mirror.  
Because there are many things  
destroyed by the air,  
because the light took a long time,  
birds and bodies and winds  
took themselves away  
until the world was mindless and gone  
and never broken.  
One man became a dark spot,  
because of his stillness,  
a soft smudge, a Rorschach shape,  
anyone's little death.

## Muybridge

The subject the possibilities  
of a horse, foggy outlines of the legs,  
hardly more than silhouettes.  
To still what could not be stilled,  
to study shadows in motion,  
all four legs off the ground at once,  
the feet bunched up under the belly.  
The eye refusing to believe in bodies  
not touching anything, not even the dark,  
beaten earth, its long mark of hooves.

## Optical Illusion

We've seen the picture—  
two faces, eye to eye,

in between them a vase.  
It depends how we're looking.

Sometimes the people disappear.  
Between us, in the field,

it's not a human scene—I can't tell  
what kind of shape we're making.

The emptiness is there, tugging  
at our edges. And I can't tell

if I could put my life in it, or flowers—



## Blue Vase

In spite of the greater brightness,  
the blue dominates, which is more  
  
than a local color, broken near  
the vase's edge. The cloth, the most  
  
living thing, some human figure  
with an inner balance of direction,  
  
the inner ear, saying where the sea is—

## Spell

Why did we look, then, if not to  
match the body to the noise,

the grumbling and splash of the sea.

The flower-strewn fields, wing feathers  
along the beach and the wreck—

the shore in the half-starred night,  
the stillness of a closed body,

the wind roaring inside the shell.

Still we had to sing, to see how  
things would get along without us.

## The Shell

—aureole-colored and hollow,  
curving  
toward an unknowable center,

like bodies I had known. You

pressed it to your ear. I heard  
nothing, then something

faint, sound of wind caught.

*A stone is the voice of the field.*

But we said

*let's call it ocean*

And this was what we wanted,  
an original form, not these versions

of birds and water stained  
with light *to touch is to give away*

everything leaving, returning

from some other place.

## **2. Other Gardens**

## The Pear

It is the new dream, how the light  
folds around her feet, the fruit gathered  
from the garden, the other hard stones.  
She presses the knife against her thumb,  
the strips like thin paper, pale green,  
spiraling softly around the flesh, the white,  
exact shape. For a moment this skin  
could be any set of stairs, and sweet scent  
or blade, nothing now can stop it.

Love, a Bird Passing Over

Its shadow a blade  
or a latch coming open,  
how you see it this way,  
as if it were always a choice  
to open or close.

## Eden

He gave them no spoon, no mirror.  
Nothing tarnished or reflected,  
nothing unconvinced. But the air  
smelled strange, birds gathered close  
at their feet. And their bodies,  
new shadows of muscle, they were stark  
and bright, they were other places,  
they were referring to someone else.  
The fruits dropped dark in the grass.  
And they saw there were seeds  
at their centers, that there was more  
to be given, after the cut and the asking.

## Snakeskin

Clouds thin into form: a hawk  
pulling a tail of rings—beads  
of an abacus, the mathematics  
of light—a lengthening spine,  
snakeskin no longer inhabited.  
All day I'm giving a name  
for what isn't there. Yet somewhere  
we've left our likeness, the hollow  
shapes of us. Even though the snake  
has slipped into the shade,  
the shed skin, deceptively whole,  
hidden in the sun-flecked grass,  
remembers what it once held.



## Caterpillar

When the mind is a flat place,  
you turn the brief stripe of your body  
into a hill, a deeper shadow.  
It's the beginning of a changed world—  
a cherry tree, and soon,  
a swelling, four wings, different eyes.

## White Hart

The dogs coming after are many  
and dark, the scent foreign,  
the problem of hunger. The woman  
half illuminated, suggestion of trees.  
It is the deer they want, white  
fragment of bone, piece of an eye  
that is watching. But he is  
only a figure crossing her body,  
snow she has curled into shape,  
her beloved, because it is winter,  
because there are things she can't use.

## Flashlight Fish

The aquarium must be dark  
for us to know the thing inside:  
we cannot see the fish's small,  
black body slipping through  
the water, only the great light  
through the glass flashing  
from its forehead, a lighthouse  
searching for what might be  
lost. The body is irrelevant:  
the light represents the whole.  
Nights I walk the edge of the lake,  
search my reflection for proof  
of the real. Stars scatter above  
my face, pale and intimate,  
translated. A universe rumbling  
on the dark surface like a skin.

Those Cattle Smaller Than a Bee  
*after Dickinson*

*That herd upon the eye.*  
Is that field closer or farther  
than it seems?  
We never go there,  
we say, tomorrow, perhaps,  
if the weather's good.  
There is a lust for another  
scene, a longing too large  
to fit inside the body.  
The bees hover and hum  
in their violent, striped fur,  
too heavy to be who they are.  
We are the same,  
excessive, but small.

Autonomous

In the body's sleep the other  
life begins,  
the involuntary pulsing—

atrium and ventricle—

mirror images, mute twins in the heart.

Between them—window, door, gate—  
whatever lets the animals out at night,

the white sheep in the road, simple  
and seized, their forms bleeding together.

They follow each other for miles.

And you have struggled  
to the sea or a similar scene.

And even then you won't be alone with your body.

## Starfish

Mute hand grasping terribly at rocks,  
you're shimmering and quiet,  
perfect-fingered, splitting your body in half.  
That strange symmetry, your arms and spines  
always returning, your body a mirror  
that dazzles you always with the same place.  
But you have never seen the dreamier,  
darker blue of the sky and the other stars.  
Is there a pain for what's missing? Perhaps—  
perhaps the arms have nothing to do with it.

Aurelia Aurita

Like a body made of veils,  
pulsing in its slow,  
drugged beauty, its soundless  
bell in the water. Sea lung,  
moon jellyfish, soft organ  
turned outward, a breath  
in the strange and violent sea.  
With no kind of eyes, no heart  
or bone, only the inner  
purple mark of a horseshoe.

## Octopus

You are like that, completely  
deaf, that swelled bulb of a head,  
a heavy balloon.

A body not made for argument,  
or music, or beauty.  
I thought all those arms were for me.

What kind of sound is there, underwater,  
the coral and the flocks of fish,  
those mute spectacles of color.

Their tiny mouths are moving.  
You go by feeling, its little shocks.

There's a flush of black ink  
blooming in the water, the darkest  
imagined flower, your escape.

And it could be nothing but a flower:  
You had grown perfect  
in the shape of being alone.



## Pomegranate

Comet grown a skin, you keep  
the time, sweet wound, clasping  
and unclasping. Persephone's  
secret, counting seeds, the darkness  
swarming in her belly like bees.

Palm grenade, poem of granite,  
you are the color of something spilled  
and strong, a woman's lips dark  
and precise, scarlet song  
with no voice left to sing it.

## Mediation

A tree grows in the corner  
of the horse's eye, silver  
and green together,  
so the world finds a place  
to enter with its logic  
and perfumes, stuttering,  
and the rest of the field  
happens again. The branches  
flutter in translation,  
blurred the way water sees,  
yet we do not turn  
to the trees, imagining  
someone made the world  
with another idea in mind.

## Dark Horse

Two gulls, dull coast, like someone's  
dream was here, constructing itself  
with rocks. Then the lighthouse sweeping  
over the sea, the dark horse stomping  
at the water, black like a mirror at night,  
useless, without idea of the self.  
In the light of the beam, the horse,  
the giant shadow behind it,  
an expelled body bewildered, its limbs  
like fragmented trees, other flights.  
But of course we were looking for danger,  
and this was a warning all along.

Eve

There is a story of a bear drunk  
from eating fermented apples. Black  
on four legs, a piece of dark sky  
torn away with its own claws,  
stumbling, directionless. Spinning  
on its own axis of spine. The apple:  
first appearance of temptation.  
And the moral of this story?  
Not that we are weak or cannot listen,  
but that it is impossible to exist  
perfectly in the world. When I left Eden,  
did I see the air part and gather itself  
back together, complete? Who doesn't want to be  
lost, lust in their great claws, blackberries  
in their mouths, frost scaling the edge  
of their fur? The bear knows the blurring  
of stars, finds the wildness in the river  
she once drank from. Lingers away  
with what she knows, with hunger,  
shreds bark and flesh. Beneath the moon,  
tears the world apart again.

## Other Gardens

### I.

They had not yet made shapes  
between the stars. A kind  
of meaning with no place to attach

itself, like muscle to bone,  
moss along the rocks.

Scattered shells, the horse,  
the polished stones.

A woman says *beautiful*,  
looking at nothing.

### II.

Their white things:  
the salt and sugar,  
the moon giving light  
away. And nothing had yet come  
to harm, without division.

Then all the flowers, white,  
they gave them names  
to distinguish one  
from the other, like constellations,

gardenia, magnolia, calla lily.

What did the body know  
of minutes, being blind?

### III.

The magnolia, floating  
in the water of the glass bowl,  
turns dark in the small

shapes of fingertips,  
though no one has spoken

(ruin being more  
mysterious, the scent).

And so we did not have to teach  
things how to die.

IV.

Crossing the bridge—  
is this what's wrong?

That things are the same  
as last time?

We are at the end of skin.

V.

Beneath the pond, a great bloom  
of orange, an orchid.

Then petals reveal themselves as fish,  
coming up for air, a sudden  
rising to the surface.

And they flash and glitter  
in imperfect circles,

not knowing whose dream  
they belong in, only that

there must be other gardens

built on the idea of this one,  
that somewhere they remain—

as before, as flowers.

VI.

False spring, this flower tricked  
into beauty, holding snow  
along its throat.

Is this what it looks like,  
a landscape  
remembering?

Color escaping over  
its boundaries, the petals—

a gesture of opening—love

and hate drawing closer together,  
incongruent,

one mind in the field.

### **3. In Absentia**



## Walls Are the Last Beginning

.  
He piles up stones  
in his mind: I do not love you,  
but this place is built.

## Harder Than This

The father has visions of a silver butcher knife,  
slicing through his knuckles like land

separating from an old continent. He never touches  
it, smashes watermelons on the stairs,

pries cookies from the pan with his thumbnail,  
dreams of a body sutured and stitched.

Before she falls asleep at night, the mother waves  
her hands in front of her face, troubled

by the absence there, wonders who  
could have left her a dark so complete.

Each time she smells rain, the girl sifts dirt  
through her hands, trembles with pebbles

and grit on her gums. She tries hard to find  
colors in the sky and swallow them for good.

Around the table they hum a song  
they have never known. They feel

they are getting smaller, as if there's not enough  
room for them and the sky both, as if some other

music sings into their skin and diminishes it,  
like two voices crossing briefly on a radio.

They sense what they shouldn't know yet: someday  
it will be harder than this to love each other.

## Subjectivity

There is a difference in the garden,  
in the flowers at night. Not the large red pose,

but the smoother, veiled fist,

the crease and sleep of petals,  
while the mirrors wish themselves away.

The flower keeps the darker dream for itself,

believing if it cannot see,  
it cannot be seen—fragrant, invisible child.

## Interior

The tree stands in the water  
above its jagged image,  
a broken string of light.  
The surface has one kind  
of introspection,  
the flickering trunk, the other self.  
Either way,  
the meaning is the same.  
And in the stillness  
the heart makes its own dark rhyme.

## The Breath the Hinge

### I.

Who drew a line around  
our bodies, which finger pulled lightly

in the sand, that said *the end*

of touch, of vision, and left us

wanting more? Yet if we are  
a mirror of nature, or if nature

mirrors us, then there is no edge  
to fall off of—  
the world is not flat—

and the light—tangled  
in trees, in puddles on the grass—  
what won't let us follow it

out of the world?

It must eventually curve back  
to leave us here again,

wanting the same music.

### II.

When I look into a mirror—

how far away am I  
from myself?

Sometimes miles of road,  
the idea of a town

circled on a map.

It's as if the mountains  
are saying *closer, come here,*  
*not far now* .

Other times, the breath on the glass,  
as if it wants to speak softly

into my ear.

III.

Holding still, I have gotten close  
to a deer, not wanting to break

the world apart any more—waiting  
for it to recognize something of itself

in me—the apple in the palm, that gift—

then the white tail leaps, elusive,  
down to the river, his breath  
over the water.

Again the deer, again the sky,

the breath the hinge.

## Corpus Callosum

Like the land bridge, the Bering Strait,  
the sea shrinking away to ice fields,

two hemispheres to the single self—  
the site of the soul, preventing the body's

collapse. But you are all gone,  
saber-toothed tigers, leaving rough

impressions on rocks, the smell of gardenias.  
Still the world does not match its scent.

And these dreams of the dead—  
stunted birches and bison, shells

lodged in snow, the sudden passage of animals—

## Exile

The island looking away,  
with its one story about the sea,  
into the dark light of the trees.  
One horse comes and leaves  
its shadow-shape, the whole  
herd of them kept off in spaces  
large enough for nothing to happen,  
though none of us has seen a fence.



## Hippocampus

### I.

The world is two things, my January  
double face,

always looking off somewhere.

It is the place in the brain  
where memory swells, hypnotic wind,

blowing its colors around.

### II.

The horses in the fields, their hearts  
bloom-red, like rosebushes

or seizures, wanting nothing  
of the sea.

### III.

*Hippocampus zosterae,*  
*hippocampus barbouri*

The marriage of the sea and the horse.

The small jaw, a coronet for your jagged  
head, your legs now a tail,

curling softly in the seagrass.

And a fusion, a sizzle, the male  
carrying eggs in his pouch.

He is almost constantly pregnant.

### IV.

Almost evening, the moon  
and the sun in the sky together,

a soft hybrid, the white shells  
hanging in the blue.

The images overlapping,  
imposed in layers over the eye,  
a flock of selves.

*Is this still the day?*

You want to ride them, your little darlings.

## Ithaca

How beautiful is a place where you  
only dream of going? Like Penelope,  
needing the sea between them to keep love  
strong, and him not knowing her as she was,  
her face like a place in the sky to chart  
a course by, her face ten years disappeared.  
And their transformations: how her heart  
became smaller, but sharper, could hold  
more, and each bird at the window was him  
returning, disguised. And what did she make  
of his stories, the slaughtered cattle, men  
changed to pigs? What did she care  
when the sky above them gave  
off such piercing and intimate light?

But You Are Not a Star

The bright points: stars  
like a bracelet unclasped,  
a straight line of stones,

but someone has taken the wrist away,  
blue glass, cold adornment.

You'd say they're like feelings.  
If only you could look at them when they died.

If only they made shapes—  
a belt, a dog, or sisters.

But you are not a star, not a bird, not so inevitable.

Pulse, pulse.

You hold up another mirror in front of the first.

## The Oracle

It was not just a place, but a response,  
where questions always returned  
as answers, the goats on the ridge  
of Parnassus convulsing. As if you  
only had to walk there to step  
into ecstasy, the accidental heaving.  
Something passing over your lips,  
persuading you to follow,  
dark fragment on the hill,  
larger than the outer edges of bodies.

## Interim

Bees move into the hollows  
of the soft, bare trees,

the carcass of a cow,  
swarming there between

the ribs, golden and death-singed.

And if there's anyplace in me empty—

the spot where the father died,  
a mirror crumpled into the chest

where you could look long  
and forever—I'm afraid something

might find it,  
that it might seal shut—

that it might be sweet—

Portraits in Absentia  
*for my father*

I.

It was how I knew the heart  
 as a child: the shape of a fist,  
 turned in and closed up, touching  
 its own edges—  
 like it was a flower in the dark  
 and there was nothing more to see—

I was sure, then, that you would die.

Only the whale's heart  
 is large enough to walk inside.

II.

I had never even hung any pictures—

*rooms in the chest,*  
*windows in the ear—*

You were a house I could never  
 live in completely—

III.

The left arm went first—visible,  
 unavailable—the tumor

spreading, working its way along  
 like a shadow in the grass.

And the body started turning  
 itself into pieces,

it was a kind of fugue  
 where one voice started before the other,

and then they made circles,  
 an arrangement—

until the last wave through the window,  
the pale arm, was pulled back in—

following the voice it heard—

and the body was more a distant  
occasion than a real thing to love.



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