

# THE WOMAN IN RED

by

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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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# 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.



## Swedenborg's Angels

As a boy Swedenborg  
prayed for God to give him a vision.  
That night he saw  
fourteen angels round his bed,  
each protecting a part of him.  
But they began to quibble.  
The two at his feet wished to be  
at his head. The two on his left side  
wanted his right. And so on.  
It became an ongoing  
battle. Swedenborg  
didn't sleep  
for months.  
He suffered  
retardation of growth,  
and stayed the height of a twelve-year-old.  
But he never lost  
the gift  
of seeing angels squabbling.  
He founded a sect on it.

That night his sister  
who also went to sleep with a prayer  
discovered she could  
leave her body  
through the top of its head  
and fly around all night.  
She spent her months  
learning to leap off cliffs  
and swing up on air currents  
gliding over the village  
for all to see (though none saw).  
She practiced great swoops  
and continued to grow because,  
it seemed,  
her body rested while her soul flew.

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.*

*A teacher of writing and literature since 1976, Hogue is currently completing her Ph.D. at the University of Arizona. She has also worked as a literacy tutor with emotionally disturbed adolescents, as a cross-cultural educator, and as a waitress. She lives in Tuscon.*



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