Helping the Morning

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New and Selected Poems

Jeanne Murray Walker

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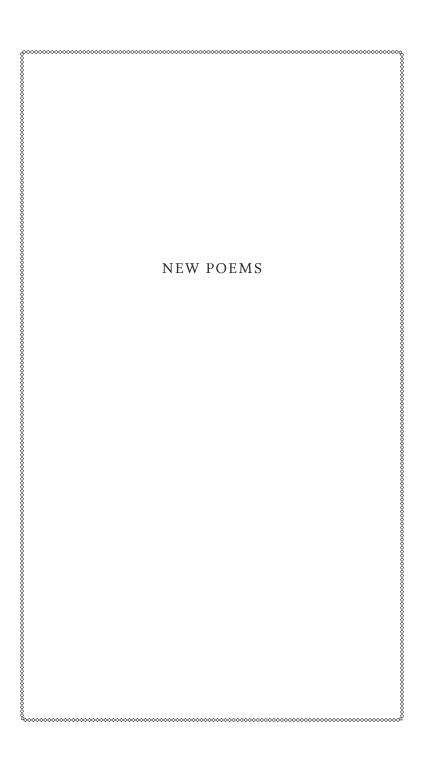
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Praise

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The doctor interrogates my eye with lasers, then grabs a plastic eyeball big as a cantaloupe, swings it open on its hinge, tears out the vitreous fluid and the optic nerve. I laugh nervously. He teaches me how dark the Dark would be without my eyes, how big the music of the eye is.

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"Hail, holy Light," blind Milton sang, "offspring of heaven." And hail, eye, for taking in what's outside,

like the eagle who once sailed above our house, rowing, dipping, writing her brave American legend, returning for another stately passacaglia, maybe to signify freedom. Or maybe she meant nothing but herself, a raptor with wing mites, and chicks waiting in a nest.

She flew into my eye, that much I know, and now she flies inside me, the two of us entangled, winging this duet. I peer at the doctor who balances the eyeball on his knee as the eagle soars around his cubicle, flaps her wings once, catches an updraft, and eye music surges. Can you hear it? Can you feel her wings beating, beating out the blessed ritornello of eyesight, as the three of us soar together across this page to feed our chicks?

The Sign

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Give me a sign, I pray, and then I see For Sale (Price Reduced) and I smile at the Almighty's roguish sense of humor,

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thinking after all he might not spurn skeptics, stretching out his carpenter's hand to let St. Thomas probe the nail holes,

stick his finger deep in the bleeding gash, feel the spiky bones, and fly through that little space to faith. Two thousand years

bereft of Jesus' body, I need a sign, although I doubt that any sign could fix for good how a God-man walked this curving earth.

And anyway, concerning signs, how childlike my belief in narrative—as if, after the question, the answer leaps up in perfect sequence.

Sequence, which is nothing but Time's lackey! So I give up narrative, however lovely, to scan the landscape. But I worry.

Suppose the sign arrived last week, for instance: the spider threading sunlight by our garage, a writhing knot of fire. Or last spring

in Carol's row of jewel-like tulips. Suppose it was that rag of human song that drifted by as we wandered Bleecker Street with Charlie,

just back from war. Or the muffled cracking as my body bends under the press of time. Not this, not that—I admit,

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I'm down to rummaging the world for nail holes. Maybe to list what's missing is to start to understand what's here.

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Opera

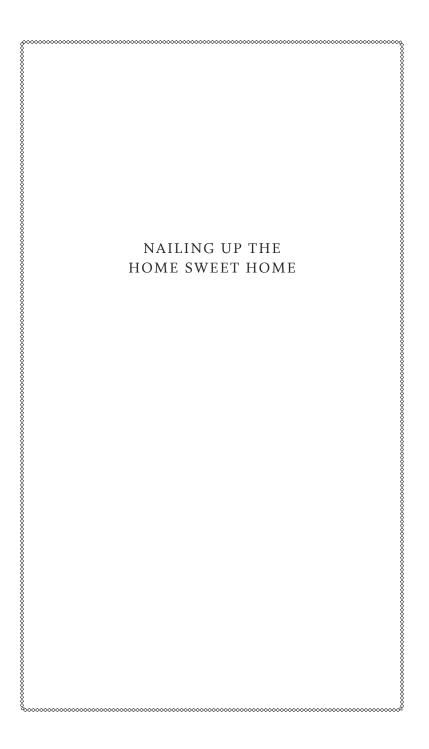
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I've seen 24,300 sunrises, maybe more, but this morning, the plump sun sings the sky awake as if it were the first time. I'm rusty at the feeling of surprise, so I get down to business, practicing appreciation, telling myself that light is an aria rolling an exotic language on the tongue of our green lawn. And then I think why bother with an opera?

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Make it simple. Come into this poem, sun. Shine. But what about tomorrow, when my kids leave home, my mother can't recall my name, when rain slides its little thumbs down our window pane all morning? Then I say to myself—who remembers nothing simple—self, then remember, the sun is a fat diva, still singing her head off somewhere behind the clouds, above the rain.

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How Things Happen

In Lincoln, Nebraska, the bell rings, and in classroom 243 a woman leans across a desk, tugging at her white Ban-Lon sweater while she lists the governors from Ashton C. Shallenberger on down. Hearing a truck outside fail, strip and grind uphill, her voice skids on a name and goes down. A fly sizzles and lights on the spiral of a notebook over which a child bends to erase the name.

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Two miles down the street, past houses you would say were all in the same monotone, a man in a stone ranch-house leans against the sink, listening to the regular boom of blood in his wrists. He is stitching a gauze herb-bag for vegetable soup, peas, tomatoes, beans—the minimum a child needs to live, when he thinks he hears on the straightaway outside a truck catch and growl uphill, making him forget to listen for the boom.

It is time for the bell to ring. The bell rings, and the child shuts the governors into the cage of her notebook. Imagine her walking past carnations deadly as the gills of slain fish. Past birch trees thrust into brown lawns like war staves. She walks until red moths bang on her eyelids. When she turns the corner of Fifty-fourth Street, in the driveway beside the coupe three men from an emergency squad are at work.

Years later, she finds the soup.

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Farm Garden in Minnesota

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Hot wind stings grit down planted rows of nothing yet, just sprouting. With luck, in three months it may swim in Mason jars. But North will take what it can first. They say it's driven hail down three years running, smashing the crops to stubble. North still holds hail in its mouth to spit behind the geese it sends out every fall.

When they want to tell how hail bullies and bullies till the spirit gives way, it's this: Think of the day Henrietta wiped her hands on a flour sack and took the news no oats, corn two thirds gone, not one cucumber thick as a wrist to float in tubs. Hail changes everything. She thinks of the five kids, two tying on their shoes with twine already. Smoothing the oilcloth, she says, "It will do." She works the math on an envelope. He frowns, but she says, "No. Egg money. I can make do another year." This is the crop he came to gather.

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After the screen door bangs shut behind him she steps out into the garden, where the hail forgot to touch a peony bush. She snaps a flower off. In her hands, it doesn't fall to tatters.

Driving North into the Headwater

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All day the radio blares news of twelve people who lost their lives on a showboat overturned by a tornado in Ames, Iowa, while I start north to find you, my dark headwater, my father. After twenty dry years would you ask how it was? Would you be waiting at the end as you must have waited at the beginning? I will tell you. Not to remember why I started was the most blank forgetting of all. While the white lane markers sutured Delaware to New Jersey, New Jersey to New York, I watched for signs and grew thirsty. The highway played its hand of green aces from Philadelphia, one after another, to Saratoga Springs. Coming into Schenectady, I drove through a wide band of country music which somewhere further north began to fade, the voices growing invisible as ghosts. Rusty harvesters stood beside barns which collapsed into waiting fields. How was it? I will tell you. I drove all day without stopping, without food, without water, for fear the car would not start again. I kept my distance from the Kozy Kamper full of children that I could see for a hundred miles in the rear view mirror, its tire buttoned onto its bumper. Beside me trucks snarled up the mountains corseted with rock, while I looked for you.

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You did not come. I looked for you. The roads grew narrower until I turned down a lane beside an old lake with reeds whiskering the shore, trees up to their knuckles in sweet water. When the needle on the gas gauge registered empty I thought: Now come. Or don't come. Daylight is shutting down. The only sign reads Nightcrawlers For Sale. Finally, I can see nothing but the muscles of my arms, stiff on the steering wheel, curving like yours used to curve. Ahead I can feel the bridge falling asleep over the river, the fields pulling up their covers to the road. I can hear the lock lock lock of the wipers which my hand has turned on, the clouds finally having begun to give rain.

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How This World Needs Keys

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I stand outside the door to my office, having just locked myself out, my keys in, and think like a thief: how solid the door, how solid myself, how this world needs keys.

Inside, the phone is not ringing. But inside my head, someone I desire decides to call, to connect us with his hand. His need worries facts. Who will answer?

Within, the keys stay themselves on the desk. The books work inside their covers, going on as usual with their harlots, plots, tulips. In that other room in my head, the hand

lifts the receiver. He begins to dial. The window, its plants, and their shadows around the phone become a fiction of themselves which cleave the air only in my mind.

Waste paper lies candid in an idea basket, and the very pencils inside my office are not. Without a key, all grows holy and conceivable as wish.

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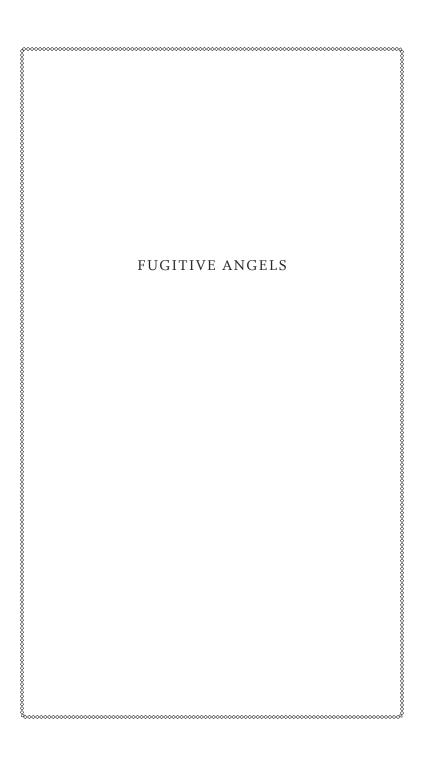
Like the fond tongues of late afternoon shadow which lick light off the grass, off the rooftops, nothing creeps the blue walls. The three pictures repose in entirely blank absence.

My office disappears before me as a meadow goes away before deep night. All that is left is desire with no keys. His hand finishes dialing. I answer.

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Shopping at the Terminal Market in Dangerous Heat

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The sun strikes, sharp against her car's hood. By the intersection of Twelfth and Market, she downshifts as a dazed bee stalls in air by the fruit stand. The summer whets its blade on a tile roof and plunges it to the heart of a dark eggplant. Sunlight leaks out of peaches. In the air-conditioned car, she can't be touched by any violence of summer.

But she hears the green bell peppers ringing over the noise of passing cars, the rasp of a hand brake. Before she knows it, she is leaping out of her front seat to snatch an apple and polish it on a pant leg. She catches her hand and makes it lay the hot apple back in its bin. Then she sees the fruit man's steady gaze among the Idahos. Under his roof

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onions are multiplying inside their jackets. The spider plants are lowering their young by ropes to hang like trapeze artists in the dangerous light. Bananas elbow one another. This fruit man is stocked with as many ideas as the ground has fruits and vegetables, one idea for each shape, each shape safe to touch. He holds a lemon up to let her safely see the sun through it.

This is his idea, not hers. And she buys the shining fruit in case someone she loves needs something luminous to eat. The fruit man grins and snaps a brown bag open. He drops the sun straight into the bag through a hole in the air. Clutching it, she climbs back into the front seat, where she shifts into first and turns toward home before the light can change.

Beyond Necessity: The Imagination

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Place a bowl of strawberries on the table, their erect hair and embossed seeds still shimmering from cold water, ruddy in the deep afternoon light. You can eat them or not eat them, transforming them to something else, or allowing them to transform themselves to something else. No act is necessary but transformation, which cannot be avoided. Rocks can hold out longer than the rest of us, but go their own calm way to sand. Feathers with their veins and weeds with their portentous shadowsto follow their changes, you must see the world with an interpreter's eye, guessing toward change. Hold things in the old hands of language, the muscles of nouns and sinews, prejudiced by pain and love. With the hands of language grasp and follow the guide rope far into the darkness like a silk thread, frayed but never snapping. And in the final darkness, you can hear the wings of geese whirring like paper, pages being torn from history, language's lovely hands, finally empty.

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Getting Saved in Molly's Drawing

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While a cow staggers toward the left-hand margin hurtling away from her tail which hangs in air and a wooba-wooba monster waddles after jaws dripping with bloody limbs shoulder stuttering ahead of his shaggy body while cries arise from the cow in shrill coils of graphite scribble toward the sky which is studded with dandelions lying impotent as so many dozing stars while a grandmother hovers over on the far right imprisoned inside the receiver of a phone forever trapped beyond the cow the cow pauses her ear speeding ahead of her body and sniffs the sky while the wooba-wooba monster gains but before it has finally snatched one more body undone from one more drawing, the cow dreamily grazes a dandelion which triggers a *rriinngg*. The grandmother hearing a star is freed to spring.

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To Grandmother on Saturday Afternoon

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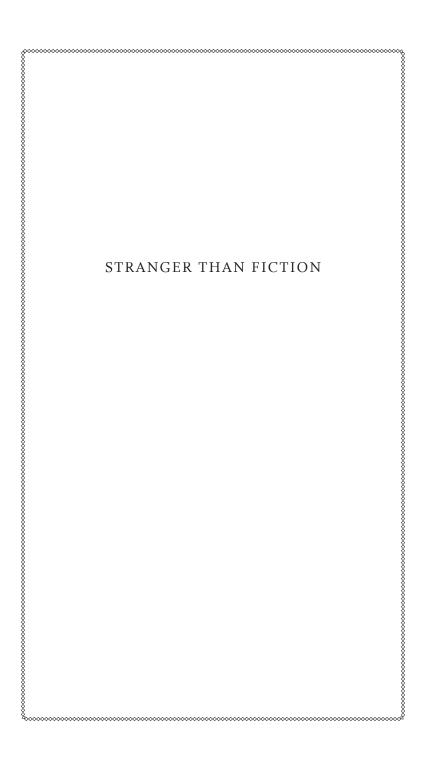
Vacuuming the Sears blue-and-brown-stippled rug, stirring the lentil soup, saving the stamps, then tumbling and stirring at the five-o'clock edge of day, staring at the paint-by-number sycamores beyond the walk as the bitter wind tears the Minnesota dark.

You walked that dark behind a plow, pulled taffy, pumped an organ, sank in the days of your labor to the depth of five children and rose with your madness quelled. No rage even to change your hairstyle. A net careens over one ear.

You get up, goaded by a thought, a pry, a twit of the minute. To the whatnot drawer: pencils, matches, nails, string bags, gum. Reluctant, cracked old fingers pushing, pushing at the clutter.

Old Crone, find it. Find what you need.

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Headline: Gardener Weds Head of Lettuce

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"The world will look different from a lettuce bed," I said to my son when he phoned to tell us, his voice through the telephone wires coming straight for my mothering heart. He says all summer where he's working, he's wheelbarrowing plump peaches, peppers, cantaloupes, cabbage, juicy tomatoes across the Jersey truck farm. When he was little, if he strayed out beyond the line of fir trees by the Smith girls' garden, he used to lie in his dim room and wheeze while I read to him and held his damp forehead. Before he left my house, he had grown lanky and pale as a tomato plant kept in a closet. So I packed him boots, thick as walls, his home away from home, but he says it's too steamy for them or for the shirts I sent against the sun. He claims he's healthy now, we ought to see him squatting every day in the bean rows inhaling the arousing pollen of corn, the flowers of peas licking his bare hands, the loose beans dangling from his pants. I can believe (barely) carrots singing suggestively and rutabagas exposing themselves. Because you can't trust nature. But he must be making this up about the lettuce. "Is lettuce related to cabbage or watercress?" I asked to test him, but he couldn't say, so I tried to warn him that he's falling for a girl who's bold, dangerous and a stranger. In these mixed marriages, what language do they speak? What can they eat for dinner?

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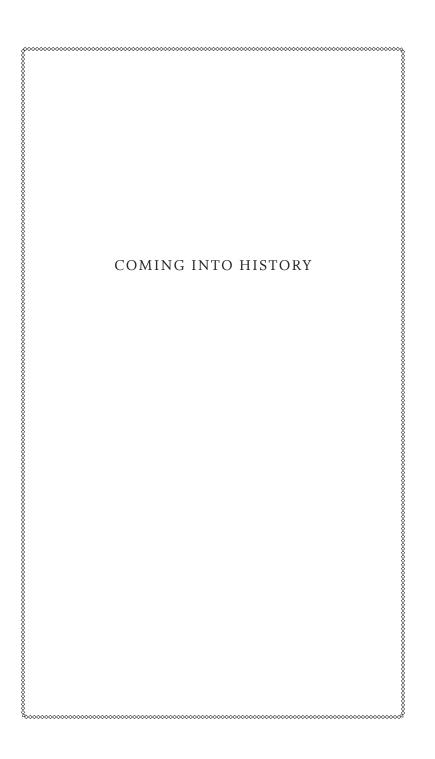
If their kids look like her mother, can he love them? We're coming to the wedding, but we won't know him. Think of that voluptuous little lettuce. And them dusting my son with Fast Gro to make him fly out of his heart, all ruffly and opened up as a sneeze in hay fever season.

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The Shawl

Somewhere on Ellis Island my mother's mother lost the shawl the women of the town crocheted for her out of mauves and purples, old tunes twisted in the strands, and clever plots woven, woven in the pattern. It was a gift. Away from that shawl my mother's mother had to move, toward the waiting train, toward Minnesota, through the smell of gasoline, through the sycamores whose leaves clinked down like foreign coins. She tripped over a broken step, caught herself, steadied her canvas bag, paid her money, wrote her name on the form, washed in communal showers, put on her skirt with its stubborn hem. When they opened the wire gate, she bowed and hoisted the bag higher to step over the threshold into the calling distance where the years stretched out plain as good dirt, and she began to imagine the calamity and extreme grace of someone wearing that mauve shawl till every night in dreams

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she chopped it,

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burned it, and, when it rose again, she buried it.

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She spent every minute chasing the furious rooster, dropping report cards into her apron pocket, bargaining in zero weather, forgetting that old grace, finally carrying her children's children on her hip while she stirred the soup, their breath soft as moss, their tiny feet stuttering against her. My feet, my breath. She bore my mother like a speck toward me as I bear you in this plain dress towards your own children, holding in my empty hands her glorious shawl, sunrise over Ellis Island.

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My Grandmother Called Me By Everything But My Own Name

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When I think of how my grandmother called me, sorting through names of the living and the dead, her voice settling briefly on each child— Gretta, Samuel, Joseph, Sophie, Alice before it perched and nested in my name,

it makes me think of all the surplus names in other houses from Tacoma to New York. They could be fluttering from flag poles. They might be flapping in fireplace flues, some of them stuck under dirty kitchen tile.

I want to save the names of all our kin. I want them to come pouring down from family trees like loads of bright fall apples into a sheet so we can gather its corners and bring them home where they can feed us.

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I want us to carry one or two in our pockets for courage when we go into strange neighborhoods where thieves hover under amber streetlights. When we sit in a dark, lonely house, I want us to send up names for flares,

because my father's name is the name of your uncle and the history they dug out of the earth together is like the complicated tunnels of the subway where every track connects with every other. Soon none of us will be far from the names.

Then no U-Haul, not even the American Van Lines, will be able to take you so far from home that you forget Hilda, her face powder trapped in wrinkles, calling you all your names, her kind fingers pressing a chocolate into your warm palm.

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Talking to the Baby About Taking the Bus

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Dusk falls like a grudge early these days, and your blond sister, Molly, is miles away. The world is wide with chance. Someone needs to teach her to survive the late bus home from school, so I bundle you up and drive to Germantown. All the way the radio rotates like a motor at the center of the world, spinning us on its dark axis: rape murder robbery rape.

When we get there, Molly's oblivious, an acrobat, she's Charlie Chaplin, her arms and legs, flashing spokes. She cartwheels down the lawn, spinning above the snaggletoothed brick walks, hand, foot, hand, practicing for balance. She could be thrown off by nothing, by the shadow of the building on the sidewalk.

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What can keep her safe against this thinking dark on all her journeys home? Nothing, the last light says, but look. As I look, yards and yards of light descend, blushing the stucco walls. The light is courteous. It waits for the bus with us.

Sitting in your stroller, you laugh and stretch your fingers toward the moon. Molly dusts the earth from her palms.

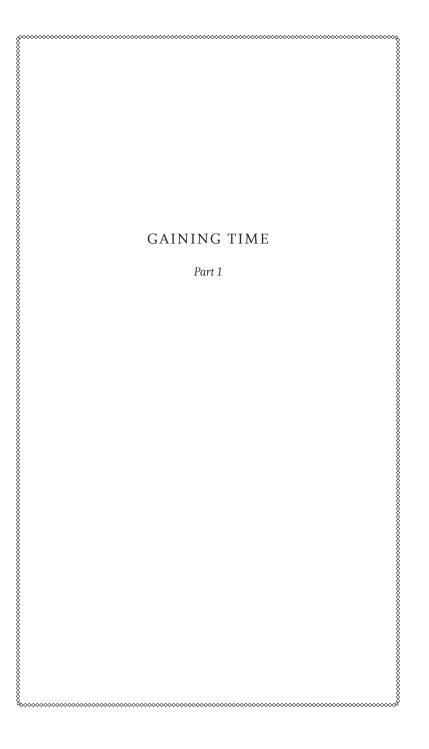
Then she upends easily, strides on her hands across the sky, and picks the moon up for you with her toes. I have to close my eyes, there is so much light.

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Listening to Beethoven's Fifth

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I.

Thunder growls hatred. Lightning torches the clouds. What can we do now but ride out disaster as trees toss their necks like stallions, as the carnal rain swamps us?

II.

Dot, dot, dot, dash. It's the Fifth. Old Ludwig having his way again, the stooped deaf magician turning his wheel so the craft will slip through, the violins cutting the waves, timpani puffing out like sails.

III.

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I am thinking how inclement news the lump invading my dear friend's body threads its signal to my reptilian brain-stem, passing its code to the cerebral cortex, then how the order faithfully goes out to check ruptures and neurofibrillary tangles, to hold against dementia and despair.

IV.

As we sit, hands folded in our laps, ranks and ranks of us, wedding rings, cuticles, everything groomed and listening, how near disaster lurks—bollixed messages, finger hinges not opening on command, some small failure swelling to commotion till chaos flashes in the circuits

and then it's all-out war, words snapping like masts in the pouring dark. And who will save us?

V.

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It is a mystery, how we pick our way, repeat old codes, how V stands for both *five* and *victory*, how, years after Beethoven died, Morse made *dot*, *dot*, *dot*, *dash* depict the letter V. How that code for victory sang above the dissonance of war to the starving French all that Nazi winter: *Dot*, *dot*, *dash*. How we rage, love, survive.

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Simultaneity

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I am trying to explain when Time lost its absolute character. It was when, after a night of futile computation, Einstein, leaving his house, caught his shoe on a flagstone and $E = mc^2$ flashed on him suddenly. In Parkers Prairie, that same day, a woman stepped into the window of a fabric store, sat down and nudged a button with her toe to show how electricity can drive the piston of a Singer: ten heartless needle stabs per second to zip up what used to take her hand a minute. Outside the window, women stare to see how the bell-shaped bronze silk loops into a sleeve miraculously, an angel turning to seize its own wing. Meanwhile, in Alsace Lorraine, dust particles scatter, the sun has rolled into the sky, the living pick up the night's dead for burial.

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but not the woman's father, corporal from the Civil War whose body lay in an inertial dappled forest until his spirit, loosened, eased out of the crampy body shape, billowed to the hem of the atmosphere, blowing like a filigree of dust, but not like dust, because it just kept going.

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"Motion is never absolute," Einstein wrote in his study, biting into a sandwich, scratching his ear, but relative, as a car's speed can be calculated only relative to the motion of the earth, and the earth's speed calculated relative to the motion of the sun and stars. Back in Parkers Prairie, as shadows dial from afternoon to night, the woman in the window, earning twenty cents an hour, flicks pieces of bronze silk so fast that she's become the very figure of a machine. A sigh ascends from the crowd. They are learning what speed is all about, how their lives could take flight. She leans forward, wipes a speck of dust from the machine's black shiny elbow. It is August, 1915. The earth is rotating from west to east at seventeen miles a minute and you are forty-two miles farther east than when you started reading.

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GAINING TIME

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Part 2: The Aunt Joe Poems

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Summer Solstice Festival in Parkers Prairie

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At midnight I send my complaints flying like bats up the chimney: for years I have been clerking at my brother-in-law's store, thirty-five cents an hour, my feet rising in my shoes like dough. I have no children. Instead, I have to watch my sister's children playing on the lawn like morning sun that shines, but not for me. No one has asked me to the summer festival. No one will ever ask me. I am the woman who is a man. I am the daughter who is older than her mother.

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One by one, my complaints fly, scaly, louse-ridden, their sharp noses twitching, to the rim of darkness, where they hit their heads. They can't get out. I always take them back. They fold their wings like umbrellas and breed under my breasts.

But outside I can hear accordions painting bright pictures in the air and feet scraping on the pavement. Who knows why tonight, after all these years, I draw in my neighbors' voices like good medicine: "Come out, Josephine. Come out and dance with us."

I have nourished my complaints so long, fed them with my blood, my milk, I am getting tired of their demands.

Maybe it's time for them to fly away. Maybe I'll fling the door open. Maybe tonight even my hobble will count as dancing.

Love Again

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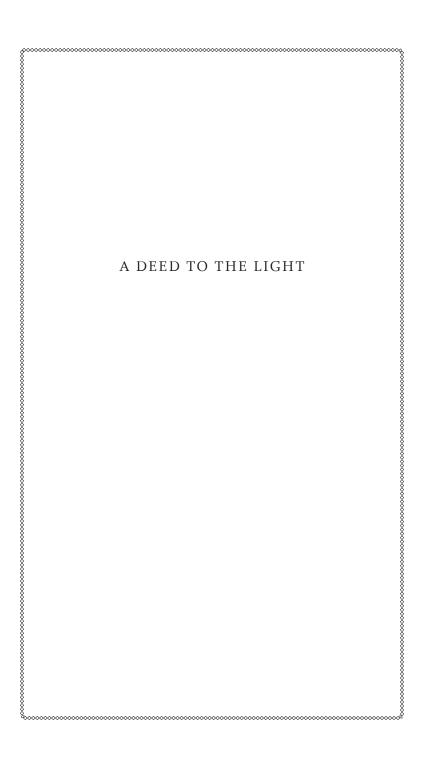
This morning the tiger lilies bloomed beside the house. The bleeding hearts are almost ready to start up. Even though my hair is scribbly and my feet are too big, time has a feeling in its bones. I am waiting on the porch swing. I think I'm going to fall in love.

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I am like a birch tree turning its seeds loose. The birch doesn't mourn, even when it's carted off to the lumber mill. Look how the tree hands over its body. Something is going to follow.

I know all about how deadly love can be. The saw bites deep into the wood. That snarling tooth would annihilate the birch tree if it could. But it is fashioning chairs and tables for a house that hasn't yet been built.

Bjorn Larsen comes to haul the junk away on Mondays. This morning I put out my six valises full of dresses. I climb up and sit on top of them. When Bjorn's truck rattles into sight, he yells, "Ah, Josephine, my beauty, not yet. No one's going to take you to the junkyard today!"



Myth

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I am thinking of those who never lost faith when the Brontosaurus unlatched from facts and drifted up toward myth. Who still loved him after learning that he was forged from different skeletons. Who admired the fat root of tail that keeps him from tipping over. Who had grown fond of the tiny head he holds up like a lantern to light him through the gallery.

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Think of the tiny woman with the hump back who comes at night and climbs the ladder to dust the prehistoric skin, who in the morning, after her momentous job, ties her plastic rain hat under her chin and waits for the bus.

Think of the scientist, even, combing the archives, glancing at the map of the giant body, wearing combat boots in case he needs to enter another bog and root around for the odd femur or clavicle, who felt his fame rise like a fever, who is proud as a father of having made the whole thing up from a few used bones.

Think of the boy skipping out of the museum store, launching a yellow brontosaurus balloon and watching the fat idea he loves mingling in the sky with other noble ideas. And think of his string that, even in this tossing wind, holds.

Making the Move

We are sitting on the floor, sorting your rock collection, sending the granite back to the earth, the mica schist to the box marked Save. I love the geode.

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"Jack," I say, and mention its shine. You hold it in your palm, deciding. Outside, it's raining, proof that no sooner do you get to know the sky than it moves on.

Tomorrow the moving van arrives. Your father and I have signed the paper. This is the last day I will touch the door where I turned so many times to feed you

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and met myself, turning. But your voice is changing. You throw me a glance: This nostalgia's prehistoric. You turn the geode over. What if we are nothing, I wonder, but the stones we choose

to keep? "Jack!" I say, this time for everything we dare not throw away. You have tossed *The Odyssey* aside. I think of the man who never stopped moving

and called it twenty years of life, remembering the chapter where he talks to his heart, how he says, "Old Friend, you who have gone everywhere with me,

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when the testing comes, do not burst." He knew how little he could carry in his knapsack and still call it Home. He would have kept this, I think,

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the split geode, gleaming like a hundred amethysts. As you toss it in the garbage, I don't even move to save it, the old stalwart rock, my heart, my heart.

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Birthday

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It was years before I grasped how, if I wrote it, no one would believe me, how the phone rang as I was getting dressed, as I was listening to my mother sing in the kitchen on her birthday,

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happy finally after two years as a widow missing him in a different way, maybe, humming about the miracle of reaching one more station, even without him, the power of her body

to keep her children in clothes, in food, the miracle that she has strength to walk to work and back, that someone pays her for what she loves to do, that God gives us no more grief than we can bear

and now her oldest child, imagine! at college where she wanted to be once herself, poised on the lip of knowledge, and so her September morning opened like a door into the sky, into some greater

likelihood, and when the phone rang it might have been the stars calling to ask whether they had the right address, it might have been joy with a marriage proposal—

all of which came later—but this was a voice that told her my brother was dead, how he was sorry, how her son was with Jesus now, how no one knew what happened, and I slunk in and watched as if I were our dog, Rags; I learned entirely from the way her shoulders slumped,

and her voice weakened like worn cloth, I knew, I knew, since I had been schooled in the ways

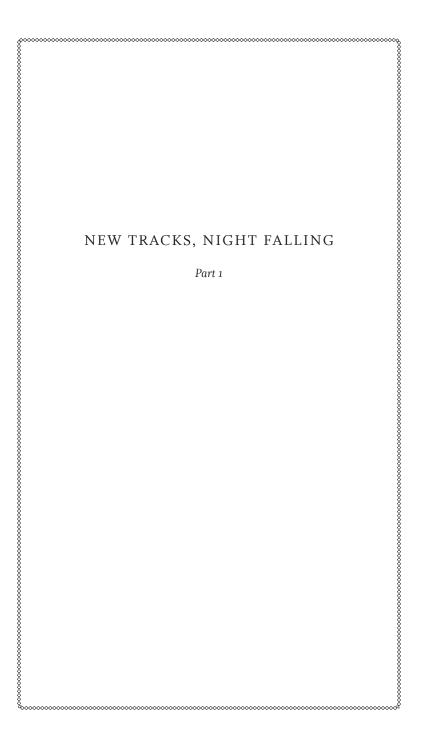
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of grief, and yet when she straightened herself to tell me, she was a mountain, she was huge and shining, on her forehead I saw hope, and, you will not believe me, it was enough.

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To Mr. Auden in a Time of War

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"In the nightmare of the dark All the dogs of Europe bark, And the living nations wait, Each sequestered in its hate." —W. H. Auden

In this dark time I want to make light bigger, to toss it in the air like a pizza chef, to stick my fists in, stretching it till I can get both arms into radiance up to the elbow and spin it above us.

But dark, oh, dark is such a genius at argument, using all the rhetorical figures. And you aren't bad yourself, Mr. Auden, elucidating war, explaining how each nation becomes a blind man alone in his own dark, gripping his cane, unable to cross the street to find his lover, who, let's say, waits by the pizza parlor though he is unable to see her, unable to sing out, the way a lover should, "Susan, it's you!"

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In truth, the dark is personal, fluttering like a red moth behind my eyelids. My Texas cousin lies dead this afternoon, and his widow's at the funeral home with their child, trying to explain where he has gone. Isn't that the brilliant final move of dark, *Poof!* to separate us from each other?

Between us, Mr. Auden, we have made darkness so dark there's no escape,

except, I wonder, isn't seeing darkness seeing? Maybe that's why, as Susan crosses, right, to find her lover, as she takes his hand, I see a stain just above the horizon. The sky, leaking sweet morning light.

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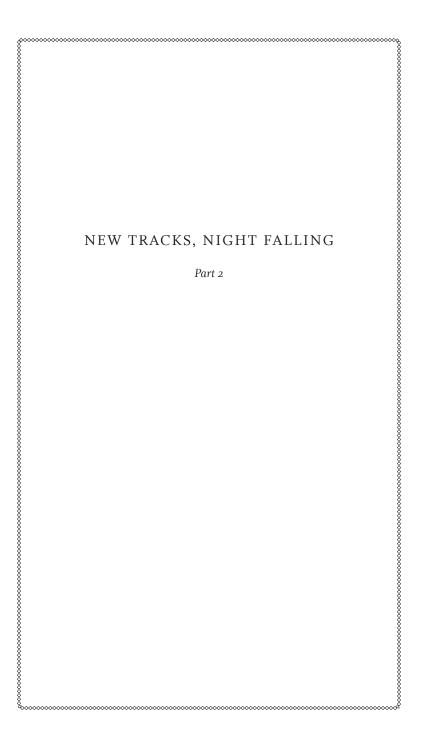
Gesture Upwards

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I have promised to pray for a friend the way one promises when there are no solutions. Here in Vermont the cold is slowing things down the way a squad car parked along the shoulder slows traffic. The birches are migrating to precincts of yellow. From there they'll take their permanent leave. I pull into a lane to study how they do it. Beside the road a cat stretches, pouring herself towards her paws. Birds scatter, fanning out as if flung into the sky, as if someone wants to demonstrate the physics of motion, nothing about bones and muscles, just a flawless gesture upward. The leaves float down so slowly it feels as if my car is sinking under water. I am a fish, watching the sea turn gold. Like the sole of a foot, a yellow leaf steps on the windshield, then another, and another, like feet, walking on water.

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A Sign

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"This painting is from my early work," he told me the stubble-faced art professor from Westchester State whose wallet had been stolen, car broken down on the way to his gallery. He needed twelve bucks

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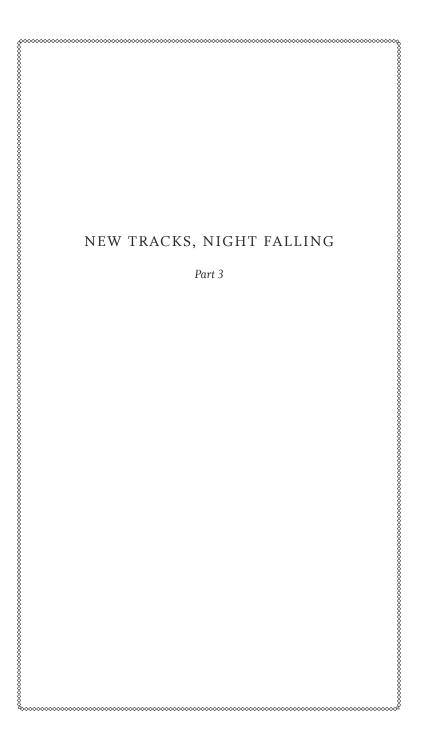
to get there. Oh, I've been taken. Plenty. It's not the money, it's the song you can't get out of your head: gullible, gullible. He waited as I thought it over. He stood, aloof and lordly, waiting.

This happened before cell phones, you understand, and he had perfect pitch, like our piano tuner, knowing the words to play me. Whatever I decided

would shape my future. I felt that. In my personal museum of the gruesome: I had refused a father milk for his baby, refused the babushka-mouth/harp woman a single quarter.

When is it too late to go back? Can the heart close up shop forever? All right, I thought, if a red Chevrolet goes by, I'll take it as a sign. A sign of what?

I wanted a signal clear as a phone call. Articulate as the boy I loved at fifteen, who one day stole up behind me, pressed the hands I dreamed of over my eyes and whispered "Guess who?"



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Or, to Put It Another Way

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She is following the voices as I once followed a car in darkness, the tail lights like two pieces of red fire smeared by rain on my windshield. Not knowing what I wanted or why, I was resolute, a swaying bundle, steering through wild curves, mad with the need to catch someone I thought I recognized.

Or, to put it another way, my mother is becoming my child, a terrified fawn, standing between the barbed wire and my car, its nose sniffing to catch the scent of home, its ears alert as two tiny sound dishes to catch any twitch in the long, fox-colored weeds.

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What I mean is my mother is leaving us, has already forgotten us, concentrating on the voices. Because it takes concentration to die properly, to find the way, to enter all that terrible glory. (�)

Perspective

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In Medieval paintings a cobbler would stand inches high beside a saint, whose moral stature filled the canvas. That is, until Brunelleschi thought up

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single point perspective. Lines receding to a speck on the horizon. Once people saw, they dreamt about it—statues and churches kneeling

beside the viewer at the commanding point. Each of us at the center! The great myth of the personal. A brigade of art teachers

swung that myth in buckets to the next teachers until generations later, it bears the heft of Truth. That is, it did. Until the night

I drove the death car, when the sky slit open to admit two headlights, double moons drilling larger and larger holes through darkness

as they bore their terrible gift, three thousand pounds of metal, toward me, and suddenly I saw the flaw in Brunelleschi's myth of the personal. Which of us

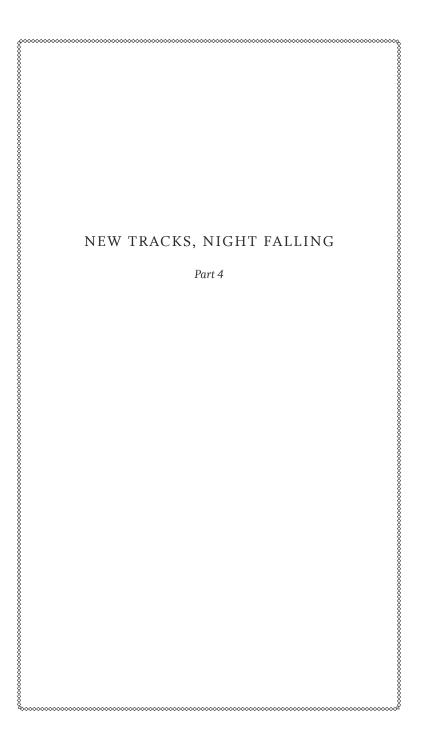
can bear to have the world hurled into her lap? I swerved then, or something swerved me,

spinning the steel off center so the car missed me.

I picked the lock of the improbable, floating back to two-point perspective, I am a tiny patron suspended in a Medieval painting—*that* one, wearing

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her everyday red hat and blue cloak, keeping her face businesslike, trying not to say "Aha" as she strides up the golden sky.



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I Make My X Here

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This morning, while I was driving, a poem came to me, so pure, so simple, Keats himself could not conceive it, and then, turning onto Lombard Street, I lost it.

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My first novel, five years in the writing, leapt like an antelope, but it was stolen from our back porch. To preserve it, I have never written another.

Things are not as good now as they were. But that's no surprise this mediocre winter Thursday evening with its ticking radiators and fireplace odors.

The miracle is that I can still remember how, once or twice, the sky opened and a thousand feathers rocked down. I make my X here, to mark where it happened.

Think of how, in the San Francisco earthquake, William Keith watched his two thousand landscapes flame orange, then die to rubies, then to ashes.

The next day he started to repaint them in praise of what he lost. In praise of going on.

Helping the Morning

After the graveside, after the ride home, after a winter of drought, the chain and padlock on my heart,

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morning shows up at my bedside, almost too late, like a big sister holding a glass of water,

and I drink, glancing through the window at the tiny red barn flung into the lap of the brown valley below.

I am amazed at the silent, terrible wonder of my health. I am giddy at the lack of war. I want to help the morning.

I pray the bedpost, the windowpanes. I put our children on two doorknobs, our sick friends in mirrors.

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Like the aperture of a camera, the morning opens and keeps opening until the room is filled with rosy light, and I could believe

anything: that grass might turn green again, that cloud the size of my hand might swell, might drift in, bringing rain.

Holding Action

Letters, be the memory of this moment, Ruth's three-legged golden lab sniffing for news beneath the hedge, grass glittering with rain, the bird feeder mangled by our car.

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Years from now I want to remember how we walked the splendid earth and saw it. When children read this and smile at its old-fashioned vision, then words, stubborn little boxcars

lugging meaning across the rickety wooden bridge to the future, hold, hold. Couple against time, bear the red geranium, the slender birch you, sentences—glitter against

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the massive dark of nothing. Tell of feet that buffed this doorsill till it gleams, of cartwheeling children. Remember the Rosetta stone, the hum of Xerox machines,

remember monks copying, how a prisoner in solitary picked up a pebble to scribble stories on the wall. Letters, I tell you, even if your paper yellows in the attic,

even if it's torn and thrown into the sea, each of you separate from your brothers,

swim through the ocean, row across the sky, walk through the wasteland, find a reader. Stay together. Hold.

About the Author

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Jeanne Murray Walker (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is a poet and playwright whose work has been widely published and performed. She heads the creative writing program at the University of Delaware, where she has been a professor of English for forty years. She also serves as a mentor in the low-residency M.F.A. program at Seattle Pacific University and on the boards of *Shenandoah* and *Image* magazines.

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Her poems and essays have been published in *The American Poetry Review, Poetry, The Atlantic Monthly, The Georgia Review, Shenandoah, The Christian Century, Blackbird, Image* and several hundred other journals. Her scripts have been performed in theaters across the United States. They are published by Dramatic Publishing Company, and they are archived in North American Women's Drama. Walker is coeditor (with Daryl Tippens) of *Shadow and Light: Literature and the Life of Faith* and author of a memoir, *The Geography of Memory.* She is the author of seven books of poetry in addition to Helping the Morning: New and Selected Poems.

Walker's work has been honored with a National Endowment for the Arts Award, a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, eight Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowships, the Glenna Luschei-*Prairie Schooner* Prize, many Pushcart nominations, inclusion in *Best American Poetry*, and inclusion in the 100-year anniversary anthology of *Poetry* magazine.