





# *Radial Symmetry*

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Katherine Larson

FOREWORD BY LOUISE GLÜCK

**Yale** UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven & London

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Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Garamond No. 3 type  
by Keystone Typesetting, Inc., Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Larson, Katherine, 1977–

Radial symmetry / Katherine Larson; foreword by Louise Glück.

p. cm. — (Yale series of younger poets ; v. 105)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-300-16919-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-300-16920-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3612.A7736R33 2011

811'.6—dc22

2010049524

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*for my mother and father*

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*¿Cómo vive esa rosa que has prendido  
junto a tu corazón?*

---

*Nunca hasta ahora contemplé en la tierra  
junto al volcán la flor.*

*How does that rose live, which you have captured  
next to your heart?*

*Never until now did I contemplate on earth,  
next to the volcano, the flower.*

—G. A. Bécquer, “Rima XXII”

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## FOREWORD

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The human fascination with beauty has produced many acts of tribute and imitation but relatively few insights, possibly because what transpires in the presence of beauty occurs in a mind initially mesmerized or stunned. Other sensations follow, none of them articulate: first a rush of excitement, this succeeded by a feeling of arrival, of completeness, and with this new completeness, insatiability—the enslaved attention refuses to relinquish its object. The hand (for example) cannot turn the page.

This power to stun the mind has diminished the prestige of beauty in literary discourse. It compels awe, and awe is well known for its capacity to silence. Here is nothing of the sort of puzzle or dilemma the mind prefers. Quite the opposite: beauty seems a sort of all-purpose solution to everything, obviating the debate and argument by which the mind is energized. In consequence, it disappears from debate: by both poets and critics, it is mentioned offhandedly or apologetically, as an incidental virtue or mild defect, unlikely to advance philosophical understanding. It exists—serene, impervious—beyond or apart from the vicissitudes of fashion; it cannot be achieved in the laboratories of ingenuity or craft. Miraculous, and also patently at odds with the play of intellect which (no matter how labored or how trivial) monopolizes contemporary attention and stimulates elaborate response. Numinous and clear, the beautiful offends the mind with its quality of self-sufficiency or finality.

Nowhere is this schism between public approbation and secret power more intensely played out than in lyric poetry. This is one of Keats's great themes: to suggest that beauty subverts the mind is not to suggest that its appeal is fundamentally or exclusively to the senses. It speaks to some abiding longing: for the pure, for the apparently whole. Song directed “not to the sensual ear”—in its presence the suspicious reader is both helpless and exalted (not, I would say, cerebral responses). In such moments, the poem seems not a relic but an absolute. Time, narrative time, is abolished. The only close parallel is falling in love:

The late cranes throwing  
their necks to the wind stay  
somewhere between  
the place that rain begins  
and the place that it ends  
they seem to exist just there  
above the horizon at least  
I only see them that way  
tossed up  
against the gray October  
light not heavy enough  
for feet to be useful or  
useless enough to make  
gravity untie its string. I'm sick  
of this stubbornness  
but the earthworms  
seem to think it all right  
they move forward  
and let the world pass  
through them they eat

and eat at it, content to connect  
everything through  
the individual links  
of their purple bodies to stay  
one place would be death.  
But somewhere between  
the crane and the worm  
between the days I pass through  
and the days that pass  
through me  
in the mind. And memory  
which outruns the body and  
grief which arrests it.

—“Statuary”

How vulnerable it seems, this poem, how fragile: a narrow column of awareness, its movement to perpetual or too transfixed to seem headlong, despite its unpunctuated urgencies. The elemental grandeur of the oppositions—birth and death, heaven and earth, crane and worm—and of the mimetic structure, the explicit lesson that “to stay / one place would be death”: these could veer close to parody or sentimentality were it not for Katherine Larson’s grace and simplicity, her eerie purity of tone. “Statuary” (like most of the poems in *Radial Symmetry*) moves toward synthesis and repose (rather than toward ecstatic disintegration), toward containment as opposed to release. But containment and repose do not imply, here, a placid summary or moral. Larson’s repose is also a quivering suspension in which multiple perceptions, multiple elements, are held in extended and mysterious relation. The shape is classic; in “Statuary” Larson has not so much made something new as she has given form to ancient knowledge.

This is a poem of great beauty. But beauty is also Larson’s subject. So much of earth is here, at once utterly natural and wholly illumined: a grave passivity infuses this collection; experience is less sought than received. The poet is a kind of dazed Miranda, so new to the world that its every ordinariness seems an emblem of wonder. “Either everything’s sublime or nothing is,” she writes, and for the span of the book, everything is.

Larson trained as a biologist, but these poems do not seem (at least to a layman) a scientist’s work. They prize sensation over analytic scrutiny, the individual example over the category. Her education in science manifests here as a passion for detail (as well as a richness of reference): “I know I’m still alive because I love / to eat,” she says, and everywhere in this work is the sensualist’s grateful and specific avidity. The longest poem in the book, “Ghost Nets,” makes a kind of dreamlike diary of being; the precision and variety of Larson’s impressions, their layered abundance, correspond to the gleanings of some very lucky (and actual) nets. The implications of the title also make of the poem a protest: an informed defense of unprotected life in the face of casually pervasive human destructiveness. Each section seems a gift, an instance of harmoniousness between consciousness and flesh, the scientist’s fastidious attention to detail suffused with an unexpected gentleness or solicitude toward matter:

*Yellow snapper, bright as egg yolk.* I look at the sea and eat my toast.

Yesterday’s lesson—the *jabonero de Cortés* or Cortez soapfish

when agitated  
secretes a mucus that lathers like soap—

—“Ghost Nets / I

and this:

“Not perfection,” the sea hisses, “but originality.” The innards  
of a blue-eyed scallop scraped onto a plastic Safeway bag.  
Soul and meat—

—“Ghost Nets / V

and this:

Every day, it happens like this.

We emerge from the pale nets of sleep like ghost shrimp  
in the estuaries—

The brain humming its electric language.

Touching something in a state of becoming.

—“Ghost Nets / VII

and this:

I remember Agassiz and the sunfish. The dream in which each  
breath is a perfect sphere, in which the only explanation is

pink and voltaic—

life! Sealed inside itself like barnacles at high tide.

.....

Down the road, large piles of murex shells—  
their insides like the insides of ears.

—“Ghost Nets / VIII

Sequence and consequence, the drama of unfolding story, play almost no role here. Nor is data organized into argument. Rather events and images are held together in some fluid medium which preserves them without changing them: the whole sequence has the fascination of a prism. Or perhaps the spectacle of a cell under a microscope with its unfolding revelations.

Intense sensation—I suppose the accurate word is pleasure—is not subjected to overt judgment or intervention. But the book as a whole is far less celebratory, less contented, than this description suggests. Larson’s passion for detail carries with it, for poet as well as reader, awareness of the transience of matter, so these luminous poems give off an atmosphere of forboding: darkness is omnipresent, encroaching.

This is especially pronounced in the love poems; erotic ravenousness is mirrored in the rapacious greed of the spirits: “. . . everywhere the spirits are hungry,” she writes:

Say you leave a crust of bread on your plate.  
~~A hundred of them could last for weeks on this.~~

---

If you said a prayer with your meal,  
the offering might feed a multitude.  
But then the sea always asks for more.

The speaker remembers the evening, dinner with her lover:

Sawdust floors. A mussel split and rusty  
against the polished ebony of the bowl,  
  
its sea smell like the beach at low tide . . .

And later:

She is suddenly aware of her desire for him  
  
across the table, next to him on the bus.  
But it makes her shiver, the way  
those shells split apart—like half-black  
  
moons that gave off no light, only  
shadows. And they were legion.

—“Low Tide Evening”

Excerpts cannot give a sense of the power such lines have in a poem that has taken its time accruing. Pacing is essential: the gravity of these unequivocal, summarizing assertions depends absolutely on the sustained images and vignettes that precede them. Statement, as it works here, has the force of inescapable truth. The last section of the four-part “Love at Thirty-two Degrees” is an example, particularly stunning in its succinctness. Here, in part, is the section preceding:

Then, there is the astronomer’s wife  
ascending stairs to her bed.

The astronomer gazes out,  
one eye at a time,

to a sky that expands  
even as it falls apart

like a paper boat dissolving in bilge.

.....

The snow outside

is white and quiet  
as a woman’s slip

against cracked floorboards.

So he walks to the house

---

inflamed by moonlight, and slips  
into the bed with his wife

her hair and arms all  
in disarray

like fish confused by waves.

The final section follows:

Science—

beyond pheromones, hormones, aesthetics of bone,  
every time I make love for love's sake alone,

I betray you.

This is a collection notable for its variety: formal, tonal, and—strikingly—environmental. It occurred to me that most poets who are, like Katherine Larson, deeply attuned to the natural world tend to be specifically attuned to a particular landscape. *Radial Symmetry* has no one context; its shifting backgrounds take the place of motion giving the collection a feeling of progression or drama as though movement in space substituted for movement in time. The effect suggests the old Hollywood mechanics of action: the driver and the passenger in the stationary car while the background lurches wildly forward and the wind machine blows apace. In a collection of poems remarkable for the stillness of the individual lyrics, such variety of setting suggests the conveyor belt's relentless momentum alluding to the brevity or insufficiency of human life.

The overall dreamlike ambiance of this work is vividly interrupted, here and there, by poems rooted in literal (or brilliantly invented) dreams—on display in such poems is a pointed and seductive wit:

In the dream, I am given a monkey heart  
and told to be careful how I love  
because of the resulting infection.

and later:

A voice says, *Metamorphosis*  
*will make you ugly. . . .*

We find ourselves, soon enough, “On the lawn of my childhood house, / an operating table, doctors, / patient under a sheet. . . .” When the sheet is lifted:

It isn't my mother. It's the monkey.

I bend my ear to its dying lips  
and it says: *You haven't much time—*  
*risk it all.*

---

Wise monkey. There are other dreams, one, notably, involving Baudelaire and Margaret Mead.

But ultimately, I think, a reader will remember these poems for their beauty, the profound sense of being in the present that their sensuality embodies, and a sense, too, of its cost.

Poetry survives because it haunts and it haunts because it is simultaneously utterly clear and deep, mysterious; because it cannot be entirely accounted for, it cannot be exhausted. The poems in *Radial Symmetry* are comparatively direct, accessible, easy to read. But Katherine Larson has that gift Yeats had, what Keats had, a power to enthrall the ear, and the ear is stubborn, easily as stubborn as the mind: it will not let this voice go:

The Milky Way sways its back  
across all of wind-eaten America  
like a dusty saddle tossed  
over your sable, lunatic horse.  
All the plains are dark.  
All the stars are cowards:  
they lie to us about their time of death  
and do nothing but dangle  
like a huge chandelier  
over nights when our mangled sobs  
make the dead reach for their guns.  
I must be one of the only girls  
who still dreams in green gingham, sees snow  
as *a steel pail's falling of frozen nails*  
like you said through pipe smoke  
on the cabin porch one night. Dear one,  
there are no nails more cold  
than those that fix you  
underground. I thought I saw you  
in the moon of the auditorium  
after my high school dance.  
Without you, it's still hard to dance.  
It's even hard to dream.

—“Broke the Lunatic Horse

Louise Glück

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the publications in which the following poems, sometimes in slightly different forms, first appeared:

*AGNI*: “Masculine/Feminine,” “Study for Love’s Body”;  
*Alaska Quarterly Review*: “In a Cemetery by the Sea: One Definition of a Circle”; *Boulevard*: “Broke the Lunatic Horse”;  
*Ekphrasis*: “Preparing for Sleep”; *El Nacional* (Venezuela): “The Gardens in Tunisia”; *The Kenyon Review*: “Crypsis and Mimicry,” “Lake of Little Birds”; *KROnline*: “Metamorphosis,” “Solarium”; *The Massachusetts Review*: “Risk”; *Notre Dame Review*: versions of “Ghost Nets” published as “Three Ghost Nets”; *Poetry*: “Almost a Figure,” “Love at Thirty–two Degrees,” “Low Tide Evening,” “Patience,” “Statuary.”

“Love at Thirty–two Degrees” was featured by *Poetry Daily*. “Statuary” was republished in *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing* (9th Edition), ed. Edgar V. Roberts (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008).

Special thanks to Louise Glück for supporting this work: her insight and generosity have been truly inspiring. Thanks to my teachers, Rita Dove, Gregory Orr, Boyer Rickel, and Charles Wright, and to Natalie Bryant Rizzieri, Danielle Chapman, and Jamison Crabtree for their close readings of these poems. Further gratitude to The Poetry Foundation, whose Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship allowed me to live and work at the Sea of Cortez, and to Heather Green: both made “Ghost Nets” possible. Finally, I’m deeply indebted to my extraordinary family, and to Alex, who notices butterflies.





## STATUARY

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The late cranes throwing  
their necks to the wind stay  
somewhere between  
the place that rain begins  
and the place that it ends  
they seem to exist just there  
above the horizon at least  
I only see them that way  
tossed up  
against the gray October  
light not heavy enough  
for feet to be useful or  
useless enough to make  
gravity untie its string. I'm sick  
of this stubbornness  
but the earthworms  
seem to think it all right  
they move forward  
and let the world pass  
through them they eat  
and eat at it, content to connect  
everything through  
the individual links  
of their purple bodies to stay  
one place would be death.  
But somewhere between  
the crane and the worm  
between the days I pass through  
and the days that pass  
through me  
is the mind. And memory  
which outruns the body and  
grief which arrests it.

## LOW TIDE EVENING

---

On the bus from the west coast of Ireland,  
a woman stares past rain pooling on the window.  
*Clover fields hemmed in by rough stone.*

The man next to her has fingers trapped  
in a botanical book; he sleeps. She knows  
that south of Galway, where they strayed

through terraced shales and grey-blue  
limestones searching for fossils, the sea  
licks pale lichens off the rocks

and everywhere the spirits are hungry.  
Say you leave a crust of bread on your plate.  
A hundred of them could last for weeks on this.

If you said a prayer with your meal,  
the offering might feed a multitude.  
But then the sea always asks for more.

She closes her eyes. The cool consequence  
of creatures that glided through ancient seabeds.  
*I travel half the world and still I feel chased.*

She thinks of dinner with the man.  
Sawdust floors. A mussel split and rusty  
against the polished ebony of the bowl,

its sea smell like the beach at low tide,  
walking through the inhuman hour  
when the world resolves into a single blue pane

of stained glass, the gulls and shadows  
involved with one thing only: hunger.  
She is suddenly aware of her desire for him

across the table, next to him on the bus.  
But it makes her shiver, the way  
those shells split apart—like half-black

moons that gave off no light, only

shadows. And they were legion.

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# STUDY FOR LOVE'S BODY

---

## I. *Landscape with Yellow Birds*

The theories of Love  
have become tremulous and complicated.  
The way snow falls or Saturn revolves  
repeatedly around some distance  
where space is nothing  
yet still something that separates.

Never mind time. Caterpillars  
have turned the fruit trees  
into body bags. The children paint  
the mandibles of fallen ones with  
silver meant for nursery stars.  
Without the immense responsibility  
of sympathy, these small deaths  
are nothing more than  
artifice. Like a single magnolia  
in a cut glass bowl  
we have no idea where  
our roots went so suddenly.

## II. *Architecture in Ruins*

Third floor of the doll factory,  
ferns suck carbon  
and sharper chemicals from air  
near the women working.

They're hunched over tables  
of warped wood.  
Half of everyone is painting  
eyes and lashes on porcelain heads, the rest  
are threading hands to sleeves.

Outside in the courtyard  
a smattering of doves rise.  
Have you ever wanted to  
kiss a stranger's hands?

## III. *Gardens Without Bats or Moss*

Gauguin writes to Theo van Gogh that in his painting he wants to suggest  
the idea of suffering—without ever explaining what kind.

---

#### IV. *In Stone Archways*

The light is spilt green milk, which is languorous  
as the red monkey Gauguin painted

by the brown body of Anna  
the Javanese. At the Chinese Market

I buy two red teacups and a can  
of coconut milk. I think—

Gauguin wouldn't know  
how Anna loved that monkey

and sang to him late at night.  
Everywhere the sea screams

at me. A great pink slab of octopus arm,  
beside it, babies seasoned in orange spices.

Such symmetry! Surely they swam  
through the night like thirsty

flowers. I think you had it right  
when you said love is the mathematics

of distance. Split like a clam on ice,  
I feel raw, half-eaten. I rot

in the cold blue of the ego,  
the crushed velvet of Anna's chair.

## PREPARING FOR SLEEP

---

—after *Rousseau*

Water snakes fall from her mouth like a knot of silk  
loosed. Fire is no companion here, the voice says  
to her, the small moon a pot of boiling milk

that keeps pouring into her dress. At night before bed  
he fills a glass of water, unbuttons his shabby coat.  
Against the plaster in the corner, the portrait

of Apollinaire salutes. *Le Douanier* wanders alone  
through *Le Jardin des Plantes*, Paris. Listening for the hoof  
of water in the thick, dark stems, the form

by which thirst hauls itself from the ground. On the roof  
of his flat, he paints in the herbarium. Lying  
on the pink divan where he can't stare enough

at the jungle that arranges its foliage against the day  
so naturally. It plays for him, is never quite the same:  
bromeliads uncurl, strange beasts pad in with moonlit eyes,

a spoonbill tiptoes past and is arrested into frame.  
The paintbrush renders. Poverty fatigues. But between  
parallel lives he finds he's deeply happy, unashamed

of his eccentricities and need to paint things  
to which no one attaches belief.  
The dark woman returns each night to his dreams

with a mandolin, stretched against dunes and fast asleep.  
Someday, he thinks, my chest could be opened  
by a switchblade. I'd die in the gutter of this street.

But in the drain where my heart might have been  
they'll find Chopin on the phonograph, a woman  
magnetized by sleep and hunted by lions in terrible skins.

## CRYPISIS AND MIMICRY

---

*Crypsis* for the way that things are hidden.  
How certain small truths disappear against  
a larger truth. The way my Cajun friend explains  
*bouillabaisse* as the synthesis of red snapper and crab,  
oysters, mussels, and crayfish. Garlic and orange  
peel. Dry white wine. *A fusion of the senses*.  
So autumn slips into the swamplands  
with glossy alligator eyes. We talk of love potions  
while drinking *café noir*. Powdered lizards  
and tender missives scrawled with blood. How her  
grandmother crushed peach seeds with stones  
to draw dirt to the bottom of a pail of bayou water:  
a speckled fish could flatten itself against those  
sediments and simply fade away. She used to dream  
there was a hole in the bucket and so the task  
was never-ending. That's *crypsis*—  
everything against intrinsic terrain dissolves in it.  
*Mimicry* is different. It's you stroking my throat  
as if I'm a bird. It's me pretending in your arms to *be* a bird.  
I am not a bird. I remember reading how the Curies' laboratory  
would glow at night; Marie wrote  
of the enchantment of those luminous silhouettes.  
I used to believe that science was only concerned  
with certainty. Later, I recognized its mystery.  
There isn't language for it—  
The way I can see you when you are shining.  
Our roots *crypsis*, our wings *mimicry*.

# A LIME TREE FOR SAN CRISTÓBAL

---

—*the Galápagos*

On this island, all the tortoises are priests  
of an exclusive past. What other living thing  
survives on prickly pear and guava? The pure  
sting of citrus delivers perfume in a halo  
of blossoms.

My carpentry here is rough  
and leaves me dreaming of Spanish arches.  
If there's anything a coast imparts, it's patience  
with imperfect lines.

Today's specimen: *Eel dark  
reddish purplish brown with pale or whitish  
brown spots.*

I know I'm still alive because I love  
to eat. On the table's a gift  
from fishermen: pink gills embroidered  
blood, the eyes—two mirrors snapped over  
with iron. This shark that I will cut and soak  
in lime has a mouth made for eating darkness—  
an architecture built without a need for dawn.



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