

Radial Symmetry

Katherine Larson

FOREWORD BY LOUISE GLÜCK

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for my mother and father

*¿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

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

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STATUARY

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.

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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