

Always This Falling

poems by CAROLYN LOCKE

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ISBN: 978-0-9825684-9-1

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Produced by Maine Authors Publishing, Rockland, Maine
www.MaineAuthorsPublishing.com

Printed in the United States of America

*For my mother, Eva R. Russell, whose songs were the beginning,
and my father, Raymond T. Russell, whose optimism endures*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the editors of the following publications in which versions of these poems first appeared:

Anthology of the Live Poets Society: "March Thaw" and "Regeneration"

Maine in Print: "Say It Was Autumn" and "At the Center"

Off the Coast: "A Gesture," "Blossom," and "Always This Falling"

Puckerbrush Review: "Margie Edwards Fogg"

Switched-on-Gutenberg: "A Reckoning"

The Waldo Independent: "French Bread"

"Always This Falling" was reprinted in the November 2009 issue of *Bangor Metro*, Tori Britton, Founding Editor, and Melanie Brooks, Managing Editor.

Heartfelt thanks: to Kathleen Ellis, Jaime Manrique, Michael Klein, Joan Larkin, and Nora Mitchell, who encouraged and inspired me early in the process of writing; to Chrystal Wing, Lucinda Garthwaite, Jim Reed, Jim Clark, Mark Wallace, and Helen Tirone, who read and critiqued this version of the manuscript; to Linda Lord, Sheila Gilluly, and Tanya Hubbard for their friendship and unfailing support and enthusiasm; to the many participants in the Clockworks Writers Conference and our WIPPOD group, as well as my Waldo County writing group, for suggestions on some of these poems; and to my husband, Gerry, and children, Jeff and Alison, for their love and encouragement.

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BALANCING

These days, I am wanting to follow the roots of maples
into their dark, thick places. Ride them
as they muscle their way into solid earth.
What is required to shrink yourself
into the smallest space
in which existence
is possible?
What is required to learn
if this hard-packed soil is as open as the universe, if
the distances between grains are,
as the poets claim, as great as light-years
between stars?

What am I to tell the self
who warns, *Stop sinking into that hole?*

What do I know? Only that even from here
the sky is visible—pale pink bleeds
into paler blue—and the shadows of the geranium
are sharp against the white wall.
Only that I can still hear
the call of the phoebe that used to stir
my morning blood.

Only that I am pulled downward
like a spiraling funnel,
digging deeper and deeper,
as earth closes her wide mouth,
and all that is left
is to drill silently
toward one still point.

MARCH THAW

Anyone who's traveled this road
knows what to expect
on the long stretch from solstice
to equinox.

How the surface buckles
and heaves when light begins
to unlock the earth. How pavement
crumbles to black dust,

leaving potholes deep enough
to lose you. How shadows
cover those unexpected dips
until you're in them. Anyone

who's been here knows,
when thaw rattles muscle and bone,
how silent red buds claw
at the closed chambers of the heart.

DISCLOSURES

*These glasses, these plates, they talk
among themselves . . . Interminable disclosures.*
-Paul Cézanne

She can't stop staring
at the butter-yellow tulips
framed in the bottom window
of the door—it's something
about a perfect rectangle,
the way the globed flowers lift
away from their stiff stems
toward the wooden sash
and never reach it—

something about the deep
grass behind them, broken
by the curve of soil—
that lets her breathe the cups
of their bodies
into her own, petals
swimming through her lungs, uncurling
against the walls of her veins.

And she can't stop looking
at the house on the corner,
how each time she gets to the end
of the road, the white clapboards
startle her into feeling the frame
of blue sea, emerald lawn,
hot-pink weigela—asymmetrical weights
pulling against the anchor
of the granite ledge.

FROM ACADIA MOUNTAIN

We're at the summit.
Below us, a small body in red climbs the foremast,
dives out over the edge. The moment
is the perfect arc of his body
just before it merges
with water.

Here in my garden
the blue-green hummingbird darts through the rain,
hovers at the tip of crimson, his body
an electric joining
of earth and sky.

Are all bodies
only this: muscle joining one thing to another
in the moment when we lose ourselves
to what we love?

My head leans
toward the hand that holds
this pen, muscles contract and expand,
trace each thought
as it leaps
to the next,

like that man
blowing the sax, his fingers
becoming brass keys, his love curving
through the arc
of the horn.

A GESTURE

Even the cats are starving in Morocco:
bony bodies, raw sores behind their ears,
on their backs and legs. Almost invisible

they lie on the cobbled paths or dusty streets,
walk gingerly on terrace walls, and quickly
disappear. The streets of the medina are rich

with the smells of oranges, apples, lemons,
strawberries, and melons, pungent with paprika,
saffron, and mustard, with the earthy scent

of carrots and potatoes, sweet lettuce—
and everywhere the sharpness of mint.
Here, where abundance is overwhelming,

the swell of bodies glides in elegant djellabas
of turquoise, orange, maroon, lime green,
and in the shadowed corners, random bodies

huddle camouflaged in gray or tan,
heads resting against stucco walls,
hands on their laps, palms up.

Sometimes a mouth moves without sound,
one thin hand reaches out,
catches your eye, and you see

the tendons and bones of an arm
exposed as the sleeve of a robe slides down,
eyes moving beneath closed lids.

You quickly turn away, then back again,
hear the echo of your returning footsteps
on stone, want your hesitation

to be read as a good omen,
to give a bit of hope. The eyes
never open, but still you reach down

and place a coin in the open palm.
The arrogance of your action
prickles down your spine.

POINT OF ENTRY

Ever since the sun dropped below the horizon,
I've been nudging the corners of darkness.
Up ahead, blue lights flash in the subzero night,
directing me down the Crocker Road, a detour
that winds through the frozen landscape,
my only beacon the glow of red taillights
in the distance. I am uneasy

depending on the knowledge of others.
We turn left and left and left again,
a bright half-moon hanging in the winter sky
while the tinny sound of steel drums
fills the car with the heat of Caribbean sun.
Up ahead lights flash again—
red and blue fingering the black night

like strobes pulsing in a dark room.
No detours this time. I approach with caution.
Forced to stop and wait, unable to resist,
I peer into the darkness. On the roadside,
silhouettes glowing like coals in a dying fire
huddle around a nest of cars. Off to the right,
the gray outline of a telephone pole

hangs like a crucifix from the wires,
and just beyond, crushed metal penetrates deep
into the brush. There is no sign of life.
My foot touches the gas pedal,
inches the car forward into the world
on the other side, all houses now in darkness
except for the occasional flicker
of candlelight from deep inside. I imagine
the moment of impact—metal against wood,
the body's continuing momentum propelling it
against the steering wheel, the soul
fleeing its comfortable cave of flesh,
spiraling into the vast emptiness,
its sharp light a white wound in the wheeling sky.

WOMEN RISING

for Tanya

1

You tell me you are a freak, a woman
who will lose her hair,
the cancer like original sin
banishing you from the garden.

2

you said i could call you
any time i needed
even at 3 a.m.
then laughed at yourself
said it was a foolish thought
that i might wake
with thoughts of you
and so i couldn't tell you then
how i had spent the long night
listening to the howling winds watching
the revolving light of the sand truck
bob along the walls a flickering
yellow presence that pulsed
like the words in my brain couldn't
tell you about the sparse moments
of dreaming when my throat
was a trumpet without breath
the only reverberation a dull ache
in my heart your words circling
around and around until i thought
i would go mad couldn't tell you
how the luminous red numbers
on the clock stood still how hours
passed between 3:05 and 3:10 how
i was falling off the edge of the earth
with you how time was not time was
only the gaping hole of my mind
me a pebble bouncing against
jagged walls couldn't tell you
how the wound in my breast
awakened as if it had heard
you crying

3

Can you see the women rising
like ghosts out of their own bodies
searching for some lost part
of themselves? how they
stand on the banks of the river
bearing bread they have kneaded
with firm hands, soup
they have simmered for hours,
scented soaps for the bath,
daisies, iris, carnations—
as if like the sirens they might waken
your senses, lure you back
across the river that cuts
the land between us? Words
are stopped in our mouths
but the gifts,
the gifts in our hands, are calling.

ROOTING AROUND

for Alison

chipped cobalt cup, rusted rake with a missing tooth,
arm chair oozing stuffing from its seat and back, a red-
spiked heel tossed into the junkyard of my mind with
coils of bedsprings, a dented car bumper, faded melmac
plate, tintype wedding portrait, pages of a girlie magazine
flipping in the breeze, leg of a mahogany table—

and now this morning there's what you left behind when
you weren't looking: a glass of rust-colored water for
washing brushes, cut up magazines strewn across your
bedroom floor, piles of limp shorts, socks turned inside
out, candle wax stuck to the surface of desk and dresser—

later, someone, or something, goes rooting around, piecing
together a crazy collage so vivid I can see it glimmer in
some distant landscape even at high noon when i'm busy
trying to weed a neat garden bordered by even stones, when
i'm working so hard to ignore the red satin pump, the limp
shorts, half-hidden in the leafy phlox, whispering, *listen to me*—

listen.

THE LACE MAKER

after Vermeer

Caught somewhere in the space
between her hands and eyes,
I bend with the lace maker
over her stitching,
fall into the lemon light,
drink the cream and royal blue of the cloth,
finger the scarlet flashes
that break the quiet moment.

I imagine her delicate weavings—
how they will graze the blue web of veins
that pulse in the wrists
of solid country women,
how flickering lamplight
will make shadows ripple
over hands that cup
the newborn's skull. Then wonder
if instead this lace will bear the weight
of steaming cups, bowls laden
with stew, plates of coarse bread,
thick goblets of red wine. And I think,

maybe all we need in this world
is fine cotton thread for weaving.