

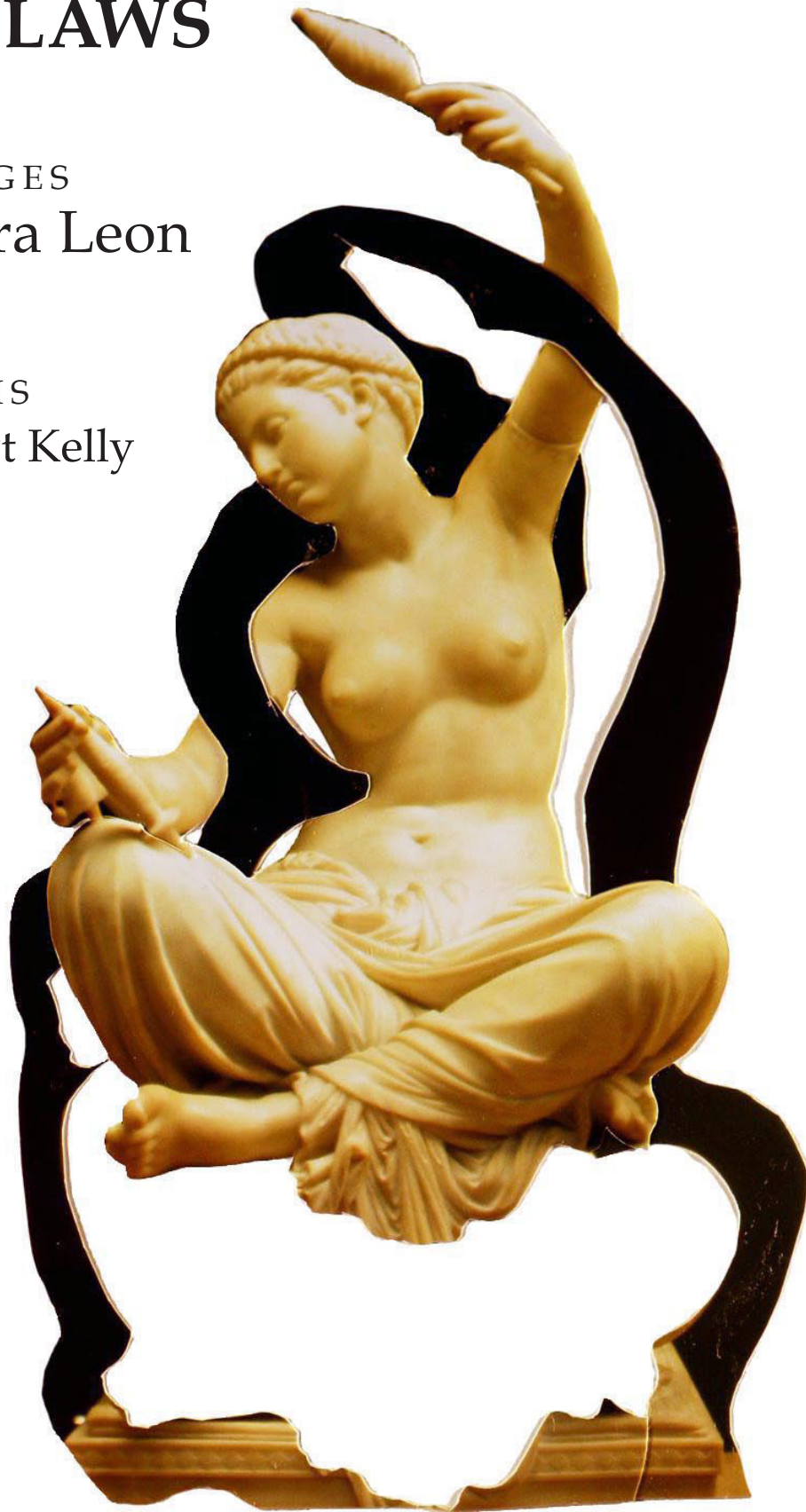
# CLAWS

COLLAGES

Barbara Leon

POEMS

Robert Kelly



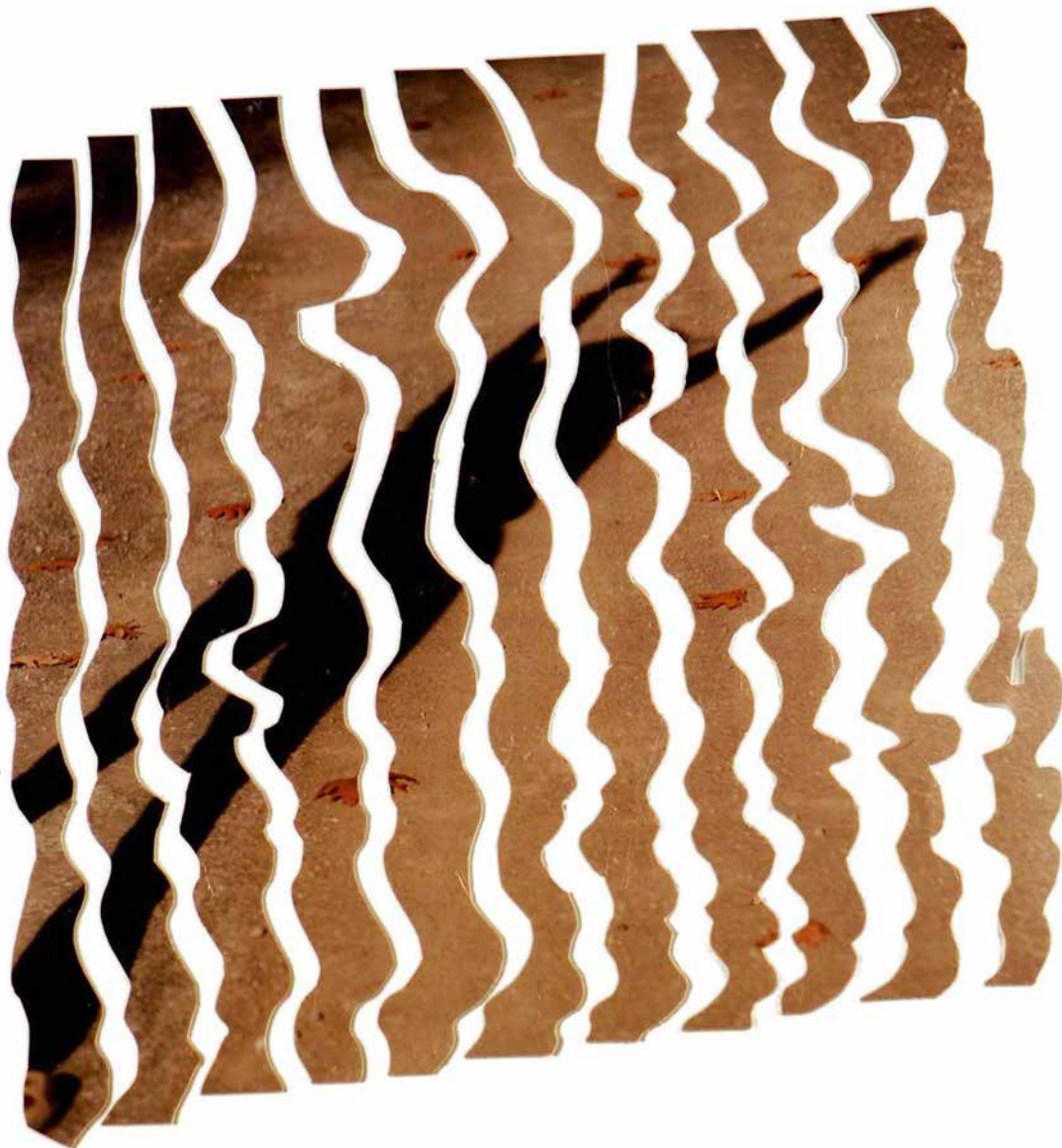
**Metambesen  
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# CLAWS

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*seeing through the gap — speaking to collages of Barbara Leon*

**Theory:**

The Lion  
was our first surgeon.  
Immobilized the patient,  
sliced the torso open  
and went right for the liver.

The liver is the life,  
Olson called it the liv-er,  
the one who does our living for us.  
Or the live-her, the woman inside us,  
the womb of blood

(what is the liver  
inside what we see?  
what gives vision life  
and where does it live  
is it in the thing itself or in the eye?)

Now from the liver of an elk  
Trickster made himself a vulva  
and a womb, got himself made love to  
by this beast and that beast  
and so the forest got populated

the millions who used to be here.

Lion eats liver all up.  
Lion chews the throat  
where speech-blood pours out.  
Lion licks the speech-blood,  
his reward, one day  
this will make him able to speak —  
till then he can roar.

At the yawn of his roar  
the birds come down from their high road  
and analyze the meat,  
work over the tendons and muscles  
until it all turns back into  
what we all are to begin with,  
food. Manna. Dinner.

The dogs get what's left.

2.

I look at these pictures. *Theoria* meant looking. The pictures I see are pictures of pictures cut open. What happens when you open a picture. Streets are cut through wilderness. Streaks of light show through Symmetry of the knife balances the unseen.

So the sense is that we learn something by opening it up.

Open the picture.

We say: bring out the meaning of something.

You tear it open with scalpel, scissor, natural claws  
and when it's spread out, spread-eagled  
the ribs and splanchna of it,  
then the inside comes out, you read what's there,  
the lion's claws have let the meaning out.

Fête champêtre. Her clothes  
lie scattered on the grass.

He mistakes her shadow  
for something she took off.

He has never seen a naked shadow.

He picks it up and sleeps it  
tenderly along her skin.





## Persephone

Rescuing Persephone from the underworld means rescuing woman from the world of being under – under the male, under the weight of childbearing, under the gloomy decades of child-rearing. Bring her back to the blue flower of simple desire she had bent to pluck when Family Matters seized her and dragged her down. Hades is her father's brother – Persephone is carried off by that most unglamorous relative, the uncle.

How bring her back.

How flower.

The lion of desire rips open the earth with his claws.

And what do we find inside? The bodies of the living and the dead mingling together in unholy miscegenation, dreaming each other's lives. That is the underworld, where we don't know with whom we sleep, or who we are when we wake.

*O Freund, ich werde sie nicht wiedersehn. Ein Traum hat mir den Traum zerstört,  
ein Traum der bittren Wirklichkeit den Traum der Phantasie. Die Toten schicken solche Träume,  
wenn wir zu viel mit und in ihnen leben. Wie weit soll unsre Trauer gehn, wie weit darf sie es,  
ohn' uns zu entwurzeln? Schmerzlicher Zwiespalt des Gefühls! . . . Glück das mir verblieb', lebe  
wohl mein treues Lieb Leben trennt vom Tod, grausam Machtgebot, Harre mein in lichter Höhn,  
hier gibt es kein Auferstehn.*

Are my dreams mine, or are they yours, whoever you are, who sent them?

Or should we just live inside the dreams as much as we can, till something comes and  
rips the dream apart, and drags us out?

Out into what?

Tear open the image  
and find out who you are,

we are buried in what we see —

so the claws of the artist come and tear the image to shreds —

only when the image is torn to shreds *but you can still see the image*, only then can you  
understand what the image meant,

understand what Persephone is.

Cutting is decision.

Scalpel, scissors, claws.

The artist *decides*.

She rips Persephone's pomegranate open  
inside I see the girls I loved in high school  
and the boys who loved the girls I loved in high school  
and the boys who loved the boys who loved the girls I loved in high school

No it's not a pomegranate  
or not only the forbidden fruit  
it is her billowing skirt  
her billowing palaeolithic skirt made out of skins  
and the animals from whom her skirt is made  
the animals are alive their skins alive they roar and bellow in the skirt

it is her body they are  
she is the Mistress of the Animals  
and is one —

the artist tears her skirt and lets the people out

Persephone lifts one gleaming seed to her lips  
and bites it gently so the ooze of life slips out

the sweet. And far away  
above all this she sleeps

her arm thrown back onto the pillow  
and in her dream all the decisions decide.

Rescue her from nature now.



## what is beneath ground

But then comes the leaping.  
the cosmological moment.  
Momentum. Shriek of the angels,  
they have such high Christian voices  
but my angels are other, older,  
but they too cry out:

It is when the object  
leaps away from its shadow  
and the affronted shadow . . .  
wait, I'll tell you what happens



once there was a woman  
who had had enough of working  
of playing of feeling good  
of feeling bad about things  
about herself of looking at trees  
and wanting to be a tree  
or many trees and looking at cats  
because they run away and  
she knew it was time to do  
something so she stepped  
out of her shadow.

Because in that country at the close of day  
they slip out of them and hang their shadows  
in grey steel lockers where they'll be ready  
for the anguish of the next working day —  
all night the shadows are nourished  
by the smells left by their human owners,  
locker room smells sustain the shadows  
and then the morning comes, the shadows  
are put on again and go to work. Here's  
the big secret (sounds like a Magyar dance):  
it is the shadow that goes to work, the shadow  
who toils and suffers, the man's the woman's  
body is only along for the ride —

but the night!

when the shadows are lost in the lockers  
and mindless bodies dance off the face of the earth,  
that's what we're always after, o Twice-born God  
with such soft skin, the sober light inside the drunken,  
that's what we want, the mindless body leaping  
and the intellect and the savage spirit  
slain or sound asleep and only the soul  
leaps up. The way a color does.

Or the way a shadow leaps out from its man  
or woman away from the theology of sun.

All this you can see before you open your eyes.

But opening the eye is the kindest surgery –  
it opens the dark inside the body  
and lets the *bright shadows* in the word slice in –

and there we see her dancing.

She has recognized what children know  
that color is made from the same leather that shadow is  
and she has pulled the shadows off  
and proposes – I can tell – to jump into the light  
disappears where brightness comes from.

A disappearing dance. The beautiful leper's ballet.

But what do children know about ballet?  
it is a kind of autumn leaf  
you pick it up and sneak it past your eye.

## the dark question

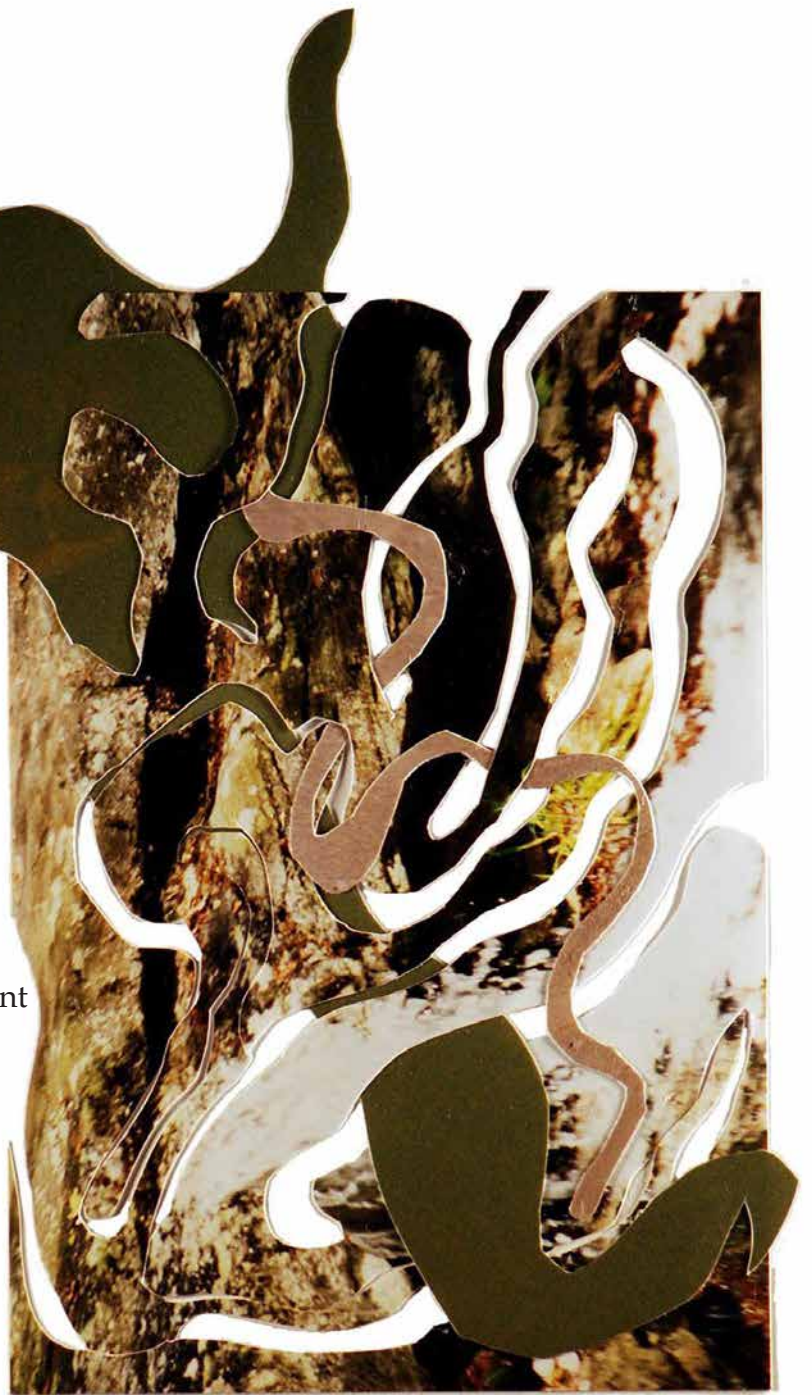
We leap out of what we know

always, what we know  
seems to be useless  
like the silken dress of your prettiest aunt  
appealing but taboo  
and you wouldn't anyhow

so up you go  
leaving your shadow  
all cut in ribbons behind

up you go  
but how soft your shadow is!  
Many a time they have come to you  
asking: May I feel your shadow,  
may I caress the dark you leave behind?

Torn to ribbons  
the feelings of a man—  
how many rejections  
does it take to make a man?





No, you may not touch  
you may not take  
this shadow into your mouth

leave the colors alone  
the dark is good enough for you

just let it settle around you  
as long as you don't touch it

and everything you know is gone.

And I said to her What do I care  
about knowledge and shadows,  
all I am is what is left  
when you have made a fuss  
and thrown up your arms  
and flounced out of the room,

this stupid play, this daily thing,  
furniture walking around at night,  
the wall talking back,  
this life, this empty hand.

## minding road

The swath of you  
through trees  
I need your clothes  
to find your bees  
deep in the under  
life of leaves  
tumulted autumn down  
to make or claim  
a way between

A robe (Ishtar  
is Esther is Astarte  
is a star) remove  
a word is radical  
(the root of me  
in you he said  
she laughed, reviewed  
how to be nude  
in the woods?  
own the ground  
easement on the  
trees (drus is oak  
is Druid is a tree)  
the etymology  
deceives honestly  
I find (my way to  
you) (she laughed,  
you think I'm tree?  
the street is silver  
it comes inside me  
and goes right through)





All around what is given  
is the ring Pass Not  
so we stay inside  
snug in the anecdotal  
knowledge we are —

“so I go back to the road  
I lift up all the footprints I made  
in getting where you are,  
I wrap them snug and press them to me,  
back and back I go until every step  
has been accounted for, lifted,  
loved. rolled, controlled.  
When I am done there are no steps left  
and I am nowhere. I have turned  
*there* inside out. The road  
ungoed. Now I am water,  
I spill on thee,  
faithful, blue as wool, yellow  
as October, new.”

(What was happening  
was taking a cloak off  
was the same as the gate  
opening was the same  
as going through)

It seemed to me we walked there together  
the trees were long-haired maidens or priestesses or something  
and they lifted their hair as we made our way there  
as if to show us their bodies  
but they had none. Suddenly  
on that empty road  
silver as dawn we were alone.



INTERMEZZO:

**A.  
Two Letters**

*Dear M.,*  
sometimes I think you claw your world apart just to see what else there is.  
Or what else is there, beyond the beautiful ordinary. Beyond your nice life,  
your toy husband, your pretty little cat.

Is there (is it) something more beautiful still? The good is the enemy of the better,  
our sages tell us, so maybe for once you believe what we are told —

you tear it open to see what's there. Anybody would do it if they dared.

Is there a beauty beyond beauty? Is there a beyond beyond beyond?

(Like the ever-expanding universe the cosmologists tell her about, is there an  
endlessly receding horizon of beauty, of value, of whatever it is she tries for,  
whatever she slashes the world apart to see?)

— P.

Dear M.,

if a man can't sleep with his own daughter, with whom should he sleep? Isn't she herself the chosen vessel, *vas electa*, carved out by his very body and his very mind that looks on her now with the same desire from which, long ago, she kindled in her mother's womb and took form? The ancient Thracians when they came down into Greece spoke of the father as Pygmalion in love with his creation. They tried, successfully, to hide the lustful father, urgent with alchemy, inside a gentle myth of the unlikely sculptor, incidentally leaving us a wise encomium of art. They were hiding the true the alchemical father, who knows he must let the morning dew of his seed settle only in the single valid rose, his daughter. They were hiding him from the crazy monotheists of the Mediterranean basin, with their neurotic anxiety about incest. What anguished people!

You and I would do better to bethink ourselves of Egypt. They hated all those fundamentalists and threw them out, to Sinai or Arabia. Egypt knew better, and turned away from the sea, ever, the harsh unnurturing animal of it, the roaring wet desert. Egypt knew we live best and breed best and think best with our own flesh and blood. The Egyptians unpieced the self, left it scattered on a thousand miles of walls, words, and nothing left in us to cling to or protect.

– P.

**B.**

**Epode**

Claw the myth apart

anything that reveals  
anything that even hints at revelation  
hole in the wall, humble stripper,

is beautiful.

The lion tears the story apart  
to find the secret —

but who tears the lion open?  
Which of us has seen the lion's heart?

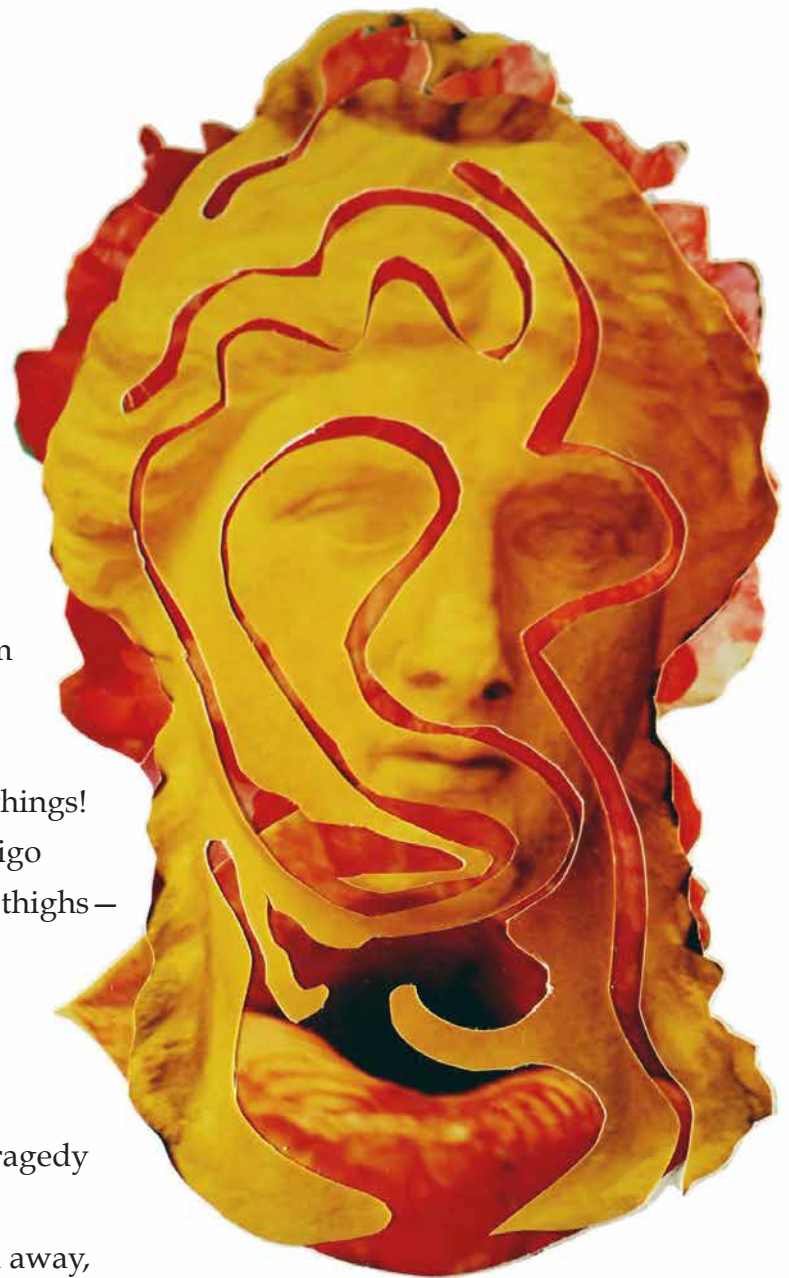
## dreamt of being another way

O dear lord how you have suffered, Lady,  
the blue integument of sky all peeled away  
and none left to tell me but the wood of you  
the glue between you and the question  
any face is always asking but you do.

Darling. You are my answer. You are left  
when everything is gone. I tend to sink  
into the structure of things until I wind  
my fat arteries and skinny veins around them  
and there is nothing that does not feed me

love, you are my oxygen. The color of such things!  
Saffron and ocher and sienna, imaginary indigo  
—I can feel it in your armpits, between your thighs—  
the blue rose of forgetting blossoms there  
like any old Technicolor movie long ago  
we never got over seeing, did you?

The things we see stay with us. That is the tragedy  
of art, the unforgotten. Yet the Greeks called  
Truth *a-lethe-ia*, that which cannot be washed away,  
rivered off, aletheia, so what we can't forget  
turns into our truth. Travels with us. Even when  
we peel the skin of this life's face away  
there is some structure of awareness left of us.





## daily prayer

The seraphs are at it again.  
You must like snakes I said  
yes she said I do you can tell

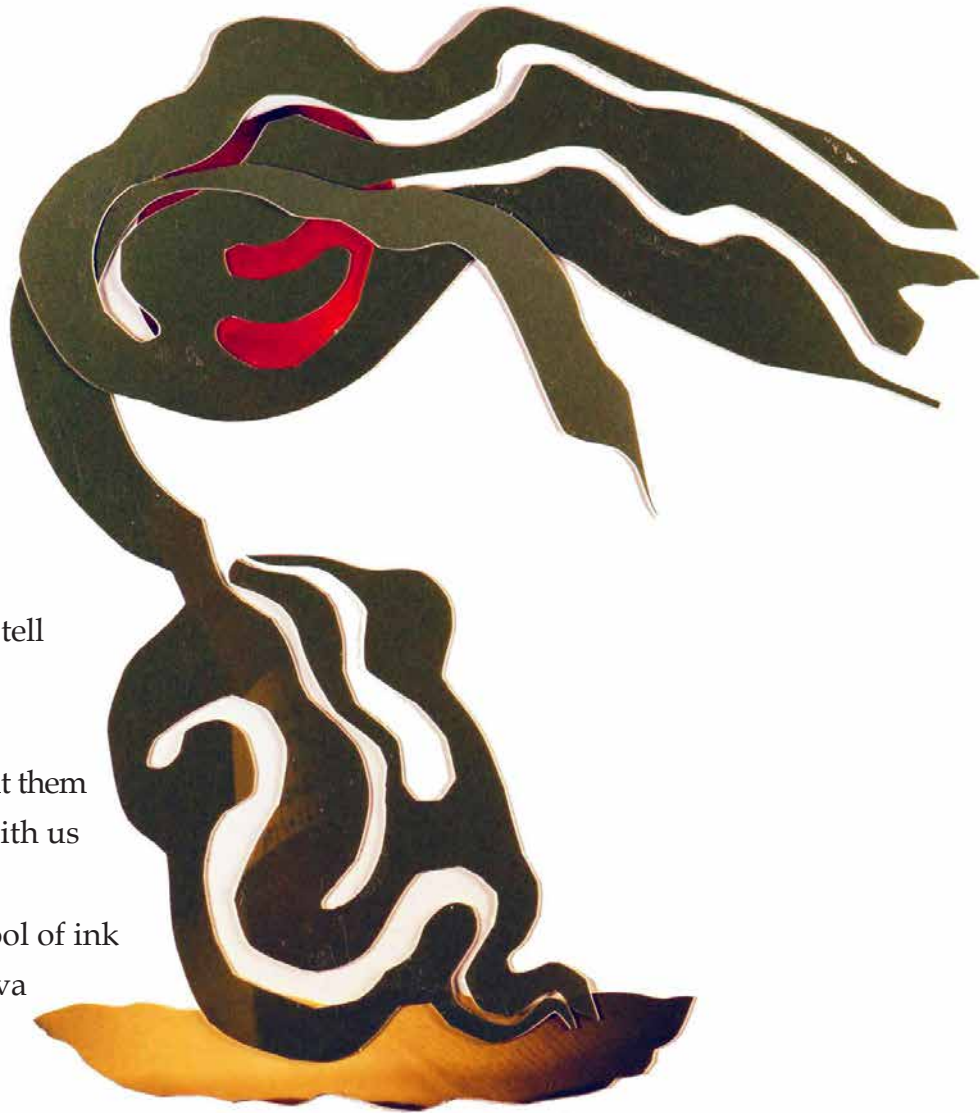
for six thousand years  
we've been listening to what they tell

for them the sky's a horror  
every footstep's a terrorist coming at them  
but still they share their prayer with us

rise from the pool of blood the pool of ink  
the hadron collider outside Geneva  
from lakes caves ditches

rise from whatever is low and permanent and hard to see  
quarks adders angels on the road to hell  
important is their prayer  
and we are somewhere in between

but forget about us  
she said  
we are a different story  
while they rise up and go down



meaning a different thing.  
And you, are you my difference?

They come out of the heart  
and go down below

the heart is a garnet  
with much of its light carved out of it  
the heart is red jasper  
with a little light carved in

if you could bathe the human heart in light all the time  
humans would live forever

the snake said, so put on the light  
and swallow the candle,  
what you call hell is a little candlelight inside  
or a 40 watt bulb glimmering in the diaphragm

but the claw caught me  
the chest gaped  
the light pooled out  
around and below me  
the light was blood

the oxygen escaping,  
and the snake had only one  
lung she said, and breathes  
a singular air

and most of what it breathes  
in it keeps inside itself

so venom is the ash of light  
the concentrated syrup of all we forget.



## heron in my pond

But is it mine?  
Isn't it?  
Isn't whatever is given  
to see  
given also to be?

Is the green cut out of the white or the white cut out of the green?  
Where does the bird stand?  
Did my heron just come down and land in your pond?  
Such a splash I made  
it tore the woods apart and let the white light in—

the light we hardly ever see, the light of perfect symmetry  
the kind the teachers rattled on about in psych class,  
gestalt, flimmerwirkung, filling up the field,  
a man's heart breaking at the sight of a heron  
standing in the little stream across the street from his house  
where the stream bends and begins its long fall to the river  
and the quiet heron stands at nightfall  
where the woman died  
in the old Christian way



pondering green on white or white on green.

And what can a man do with his heart,  
is the heart a heron? and where can it land?  
can it be safe anywhere?

A score or more of green leaf radians reach out  
from where the calm bird looks the other way.

We know how to get the answer,  
we watch the knife marks, see the green world cut away  
to let the other world come in and burst out at the same time.

I step across the little street  
and wander on the grass  
I step into your pond.  
I say something,  
I speak bird and you speak tree,  
we impersonate the actual  
because the actual has no words but ours,

we tell our lies to link the world together,  
it all is a kind of seducing  
seducing things to keep going on,  
keep them coming down into your pool and lingering.

Everything we say is just lingering

because we want to be close to one another,  
so close, close as the bird to the sky or the bird to the pond

and we have the words for everything but that.

## she wanted out

But that is what it's all about  
the fleeing into nakedness  
as if the only Out there is  
is what we are to start with

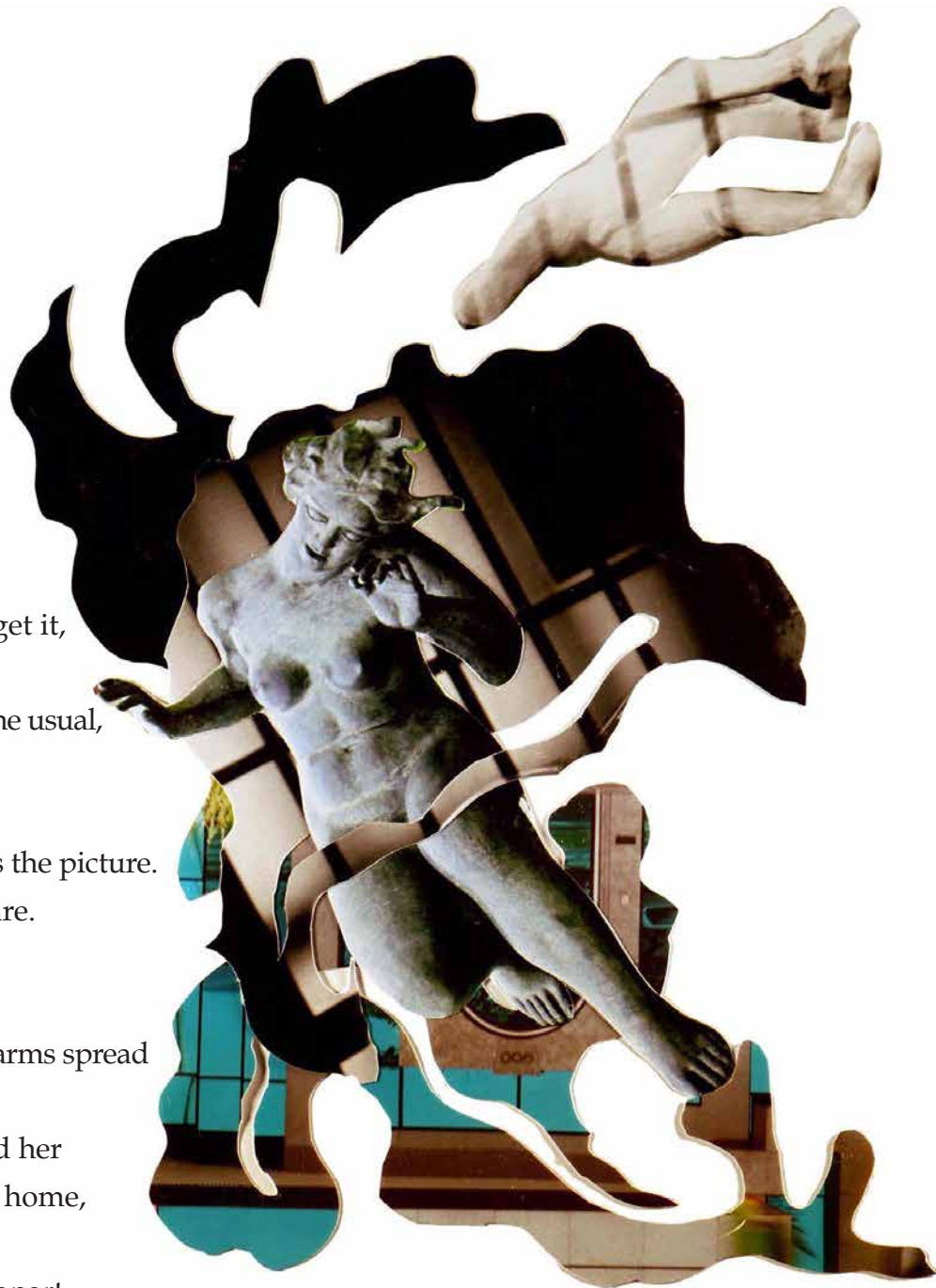
bare, colorless, full of wanting,  
ready to tear the world apart to get it,  
what, it's not easy to know.  
But it's there, on the other side of the usual,

the other side of our clothing  
is the inside. The artist undresses the picture.  
You find an image and strip it bare.  
Then what, what do you do

when a white stone maiden with arms spread  
comes hurtling past you  
trying to get out? You try to hold her  
but it's time for everybody to go home,

even that stone suchness comes apart,  
the eye cuts through the world  
and everything seen turns out to be  
just a veil you want to rip open

and you do. Each one of us on earth  
is married to some invisible beauty  
we tear the world apart to see— isn't  
that what your little scalpel says?





## entwined

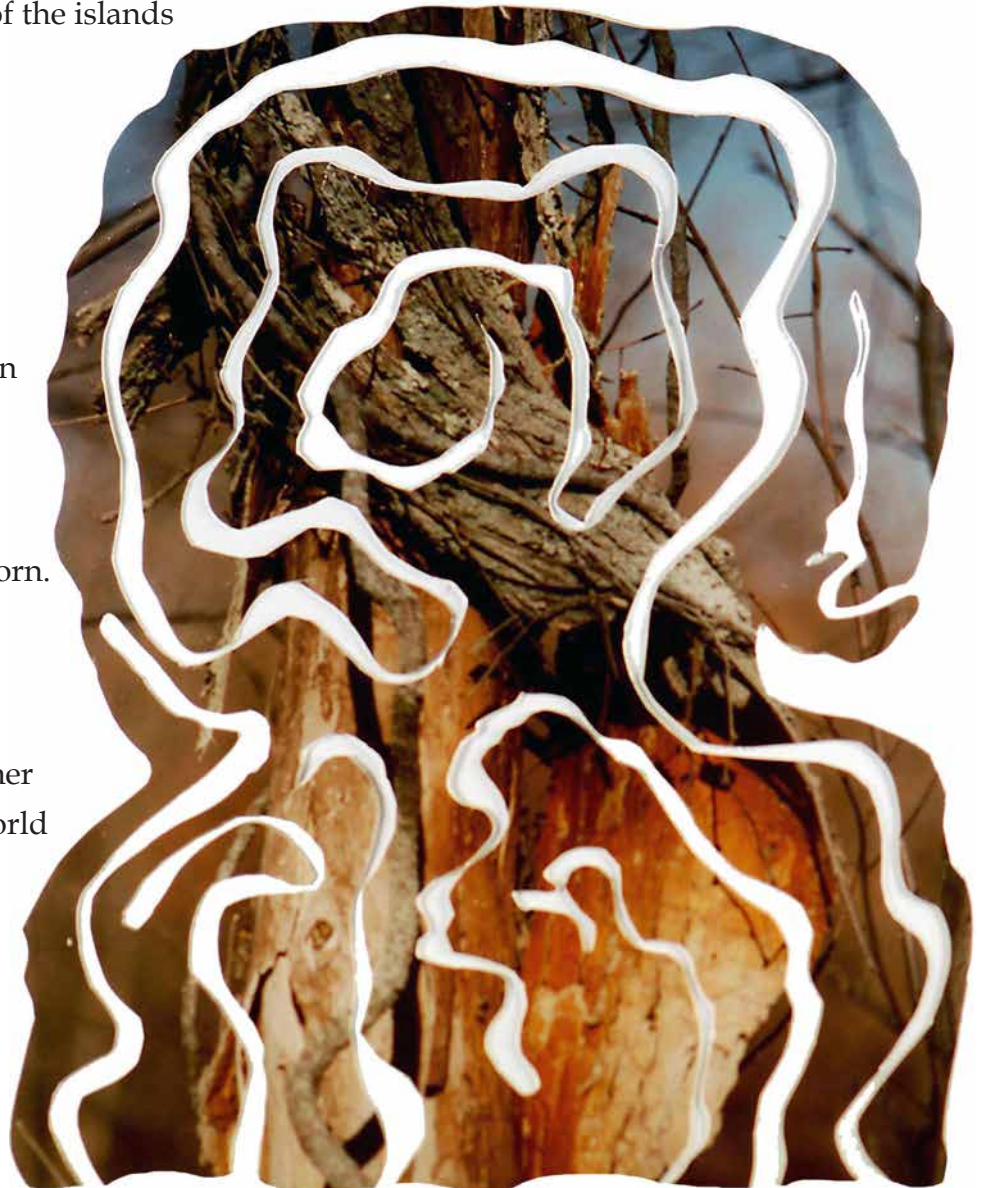
We live in wood.  
And there is no because.  
Yesterday I passed a tree  
high above the stream  
where my heron sits

I have a heron too  
I give it to you  
not the green night-heron of the islands  
but the white one  
stands in the pool  
where the old priest died

but we live and live  
and live in wood  
you have cut the forest open  
to show the tree  
the tree cracked open

to show where colors are born.  
I know you  
because I know us,  
we were born inside,  
as if from some skyey mother  
squeezed down into the world

into the magnetism of skin.  
As I was saying  
I passed a tree  
all of its bark  
had fallen free  
and lay shattered  
sheets of it all over the path  
a whole tree's worth of bark



and I thought of someone  
showing her body  
to the mind of the world  
a naked person at a window

and this bare tree.  
Why did it take off its bark?  
Why do we so much want to be known.

You tear the colors open  
and show the single color of life  
inside, heartwood,  
the animal of wood, the face  
inside my face,  
I have a face that looks at you  
and then a face that sees

you cut things open  
to see what they see

you give the tree eyes  
it strips its bark  
and stands above the little stream

it sees everything.  
But why so we want so much to be known  
and what will we do about it,  
can I follow the fissures you carve in the actual  
and find the reality behind the wood

of which the wood is also the only face?  
You have let me see so much.  
In my mind's ear I hear the rattle  
of the dry bark as it slipped off and fell down.

Sound wakes the eye.



### *Second Intermezzo*

Where did the girl go?

One day she was not in her house.  
She had gone  
somewhere. As we say.  
She got on an airplane and went to the sky.  
Then what. Then where.



The house was empty.

She was clawing her way through the blue sky  
to find that other place beyond such simple things.  
She was always flying, she was always going,  
always tearing this place open and finding  
the other place.

Because a house is a collage.  
She put it together piece by piece  
and tore it open.

A door is a claw.  
She opens the house.  
She opens the sky.

A life is a collage, everything that happens  
tears the pastel picture opens, blurs  
the edges of the careful photo,  
rips the daily image open  
or gently parts the seams,  
imagine how a dancer's clothes could  
in the twist and exaltation of the dance come  
open. Because a life is the portrait  
of something knowing itself  
by standing still, the null-movement,  
the silver center,  
a dance is a collage  
a person does things to the space of place  
does things to the air.

Now she has gone into the air.  
The house is empty

through the claw-marks in the walls  
I can look in and see what each house means.

This is where the dance began  
this is where she'll come back

she'll be anxious to be here,  
the thing called home,

where in the sliced open universe  
she can see at last where she has been

gone and seen  
and come to be safe in her image again.

*and then*

the light breaks in like any thief  
and steals her shadows —  
she is overt in the mirror,  
spoons gleam in the kitchen sink,  
the toast smokes. Who am I?

Birds rattle leaves outside.  
Nowhere to hide.

*So I have scratched the image off my face  
and left my face,  
I have opened my eyes  
the way a branch unfurls its leaves  
or the way a cat wakes up all awake at once  
or the way the rain begins to fall*

*and I see everything I saw before  
but this time it is new.*

*Or:*

he came through the door  
excusing himself for slipping  
uninvited through some gashes in her wall

she was afraid that was going  
to happen if she spoke out loud  
or even couched her thoughts in words

words would always lead her into trouble  
rough brick walls and probing  
hands of words all over her

she blamed herself for letting him come in  
since what could he do now  
but follow the gap in the texture

what can any of us ever do  
but walk through every door?  
All we ever want is to go in.

*One sews and another rips*

it doesn't say quite in the Bible but  
something close to enough

you spend your life stitching your life together  
seamless friendships omnivorous marriages

then someone with his profile with her nails  
rips the silken fabric of the day, the satin  
text of night-time rends and there you are

exposed in flesh-colored contingency again.  
Doesn't have to be like that: you yourself  
can step into the mirror that dissolving house

and be your other, you can choose your knife  
or secateurs or tiny cuticle scissors such  
as your grandmother wielded once

on truant skin or skeins of knitting wool,  
two tiny blades to nip the world asunder  
so now you can be out and in at once,

master of the surgery that makes you see.

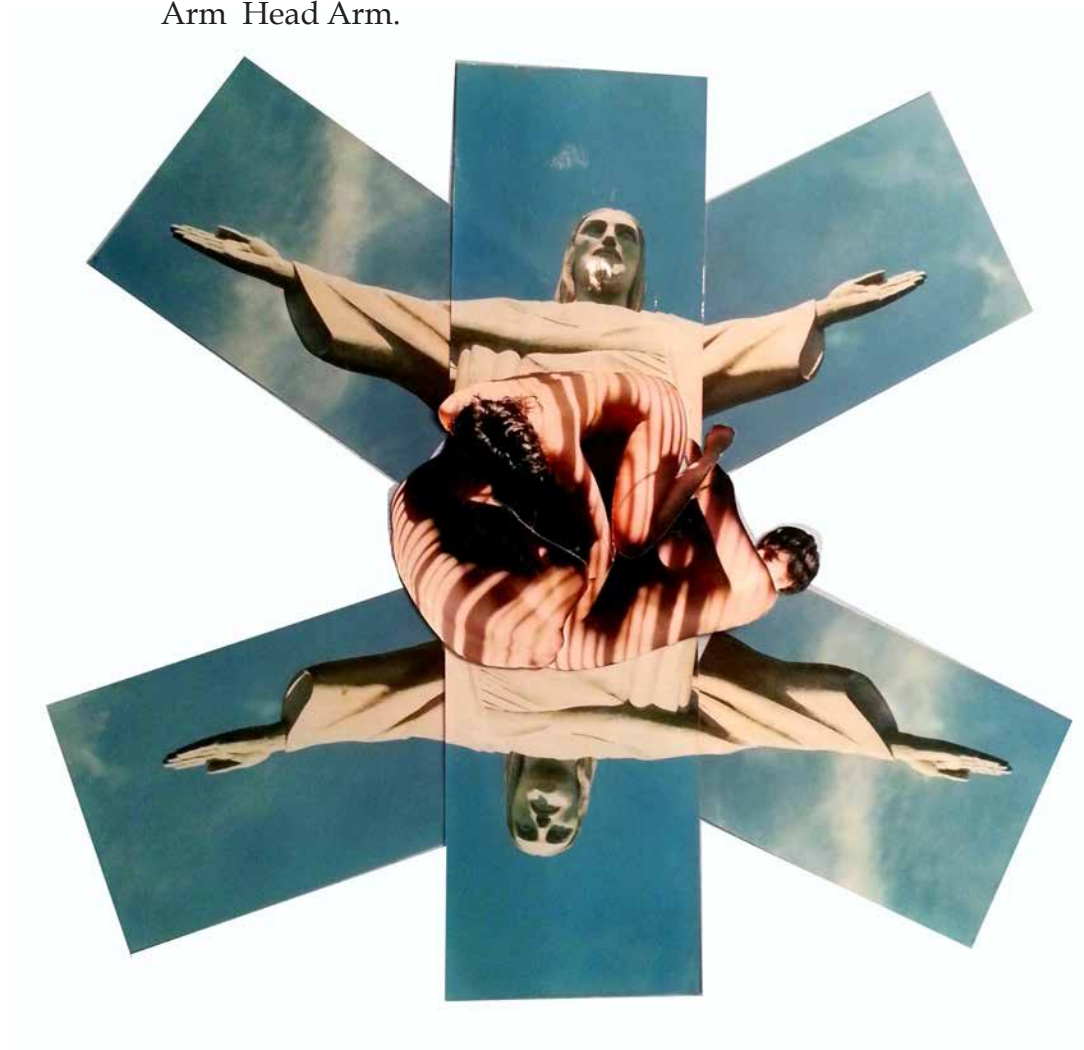
## Eternal Brazil

Across the midlife of Christ's body she  
clutches, sprawls out mothergirlfriendwifewise over  
to hold him where the his body joins his body

Christ mirrored on the sky becomes  
David's star.

Arm Head Arm

Arm Head Arm.



I'd know those hips anywhere, the glad  
upreach out of her taking hold  
she holds him in the middle of the sky  
makes the Jew of him eternal  
piercing to the Jew of us

And what does he think,  
his head in the sky, his head in the ground?

*Vaks vi a tsibbole mit'm kop in drerd !*  
we used to say in Brooklyn,  
where no onions grew, and the earth  
was hard to find beneath cement.

*What do I think when this girl sprawls across my body,  
the weight of her breast, the lift of her hip bones,  
the sound of her breath?*

*I can't see her face,  
I can't understand the smell of her breath,  
fragrance of her words –  
this inability  
is why I'm in heaven. Why I'm in hell.*

She does it. She wants to be everything, to touch  
men where they begin to be themselves,  
where their minds divide  
and into the luminous gap between  
hell and heaven a simple earth  
is possible again,  
she thinks.

Mosquitoes hang low over the shore, asking for blood.  
Give men also what they need.





## Old Soul

I am made of wood  
because I could.  
I am made of bone  
and think alone.  
I am made of bark  
peeled from the dark.  
Fingers form my house  
and absence is my spouse.  
Deep below the earth  
they found my birth,  
that stinking cave  
is all I have.

*You're not so old.  
You're not so bold.  
Your bone is meat  
that I could eat.  
I was your tree  
and always will be.  
And they are mine  
as I am thine.  
I dug so deep  
to find you in my sleep.  
But all my lies  
will make you wise.*

If my face were made of wood  
I would never have sore eyes,  
I would never talk out of turn  
or bore the company with what's on my mind.

No one gave me the right to speak  
but language did.

No one told me I could see  
so I took the world inside

and look at it whenever I please.  
I keep you there safe in mind

and there we know each other best  
beyond the earthliest.

It makes me old.



## Diablo mio

I wonder who you are my darling bed  
I lay me down in you every morning when I wake

I embrace you from behind  
your face too bright for me to see

I lie down in you and call it waking up  
I smell your skin deep in my pillowcase

I can't tell up from down.

To live in a sensory world is drown in a dream.

I put my cheek against your cushion and hear you talk.

And everything is your face.

When you cut a fruit open and see someone's face

When you saw a length of white pine and it whispers to you a story you thought  
nobody knew but you

When you throw open the door no one comes in but the room fills up with  
conversation

When you bite into a peach neatly but it soaks every inch of your body

When you think you hear a dog barking but it's you saying a prayer and there's  
no god anywhere to hear you

then you know your old devil is with you

with a voice like a scorpion

a voice like a damp pillow in summertime

a voice like scrambling up a scree slope in the Rockies

a voice like the air inside shopping malls

a voice like junk mail shiny catalogues

a voice like me.



### *Leda's*

Show me your breasts are you sure you're a girl  
what will happen to all that love gushed into you  
don't waste it on eggs, we don't need Troy destroyed again,  
don't waste it on human children or shadow-gods,  
O let him peck your neck your breasts are full enough for him  
but keep him from that shaven snatch of yours, the hotspot,  
the trouble zone, the house of more than meets the eye,  
the pleasure ground, the graveyard where death is buried.



Why don't you trust me? I alone have no designs  
on beauty and intelligence and love – the Three  
Graces are one woman standing by two mirrors,  
don't you know that? The Zeus that swans down  
from the sky means to snatch you from the ordinary  
where people get pregnant and give birth and die  
as if they were mechanics of Nature's endless machinations.  
Zeus can be poetry. Zeus can be disease. Zeus  
is anything that snatches you for the sky  
and saves you from the commonplace. Trust me,  
I want nothing from you but you, and you  
need the way I look at you, the way I clutch  
heavy-handed as a feather your sacred meat.