

CONCEALED IN BRIGHTNESS



recent photographs by
CHARLOTTE MANDELL
with answering poems by
ROBERT KELLY

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Metambesen
Annandale-on-Hudson
2018

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The photographs in this book were taken in Spring and Summer 2018, most of them on Cuttyhunk Island off Massachusetts, a few in Annandale-on-Hudson, whose stream, the Metambesen, flows into the Hudson, an estuary of the sea. The poems in response were composed between August and December 2018.



a nymph from the sea
taking the form of Klimt's
still living left and right
hands painted the shore
so that the sea brought
in its eternal obedience
stones of all the right colors
and set them in all the right
places. The sea listens.
Stones listen. The triumph
of abstract sexuality, nimble
nymph of the naked mind.



Water falls uphill
when you dive in.
It tries to go back to the sky
from which it came,
ancient rain.

That's what the tide
really means, ardent
solemnity of cresting high
as it can to be at last above.

And when the swimmer kicks
or splashes in the shallows
how joyous ocean is then,
lifting, lifting,
like the great waves
off Oahu happy,
even to let surfers ride.



Is the door open or closed
is the chair empty or not
are we inside or out

a picture is something you just see
you can never be in, only taste
the shapes of what is shown

is a word a door, it is open
all the time and we can't go in

the chair is occupied
by the ghost of an idea

every image reveals to us
what it is that we have lost.



Here is a safety in lost things
a soft horizon over which they fall
and dream us in their lives no more

consider every item, tool, book, furniture you own
as one wave, just one, in an endless sea.
always gone. Always another on the way.

A wave is like that, loves you immensely,
intensely, then is gone. Things are like that—
a pen I have that fell apart the day

the man who gave it to me died. A man I knew
who was a friend. He died. The air tonight
is humid, the trees stand still, the wave rises.



**And Thomas said to Lord Jesus
Sir, if I had not seen the light
shimmer on your skin I had not
the courage to reach out and touch –
forgive my dependency on senses.
And Jesus said yes, blessed are those
who believe without seeing, but blessed
thrice are those who see, and seeing
touch, and touching know both
sides of what is there, the always
and the sometimes. And now you know
that I am water, and light on water
and thus I will always be with you.**



Water leaps, a shimmer of vowels
not the least hushing a word
almost spoken, and when
we see that word leap out of all
those orderly waves we know
there is a *sudden someone* there
who lifts the water so quickly,
offering it to the sky, their troth
plighted again, whatever it means,
whatever it means to be someone
swimming, the splash we hear,
the light cascading back into silence.



From the rocks there springs
a bird of fire, comes towards us
watching in the cold night. Keeping
watch. Wait what comes. This too
comes from the sea, has been waiting
for the geology of our desires
to lift the stones, set fire to the dry kelp
until there is nothing in the world but
sea and fire. Then the sea knows itself
in us, our moist eyes in the fire glare,
the bird swooping towards us. Elementary
miracles, like the heart inside us all.



O light that loves me
be my island! I have come to you
since I was a little boy
wanting you to come to me
across the sea, the way years later
I would read how years ago
Isis herself came walking
slow across the sea to liberate
a boy from his animal condition.
O light walk to me now,
my beautiful wife at my side,
goddess a-plenty for my need
but I need thee, light that makes
the night a sparkling thing
and quiets day into a soft white page
one day we'll write the whole truth on.



Her face when she sees the island.
She's coming home, she's on the sea
so home already but up ahead
she sees the glacial hill where her house stands,
where she learned to be just a person
among other persons, we all have to learn that,
but all the rest she never had to learn.
The joy is built into her sea. I can see it
in this picture I stole with her camera,
the face softly smiling at the sight of home,
first glimpse, about an hour out from shore.



Herself at home,
the crown of being
she is exalted in the depths
the sun sneaks in
to calm the water, calm it
into an image, something
our eyes can hold – a woman
smiling (she must be) towards us
under the surface, she moves
through her own nature,
crowned by what she herself is.
And that's where the sun comes in.



Then the sea slept again
and dreamed a purple kingdom
no, a violet flower waltzed by wind,
no, a field of lavender deep in France –
no, but something spoke, waves,
and what are waves anyway but tongues
always speaking. But the color
of its word amazed me, I was just
a man on earth, how could I endure
the lights glancing off the word,
a sinking happens, a swimming in
and down, the light flakes upward –
being overwhelmed is beauty too.



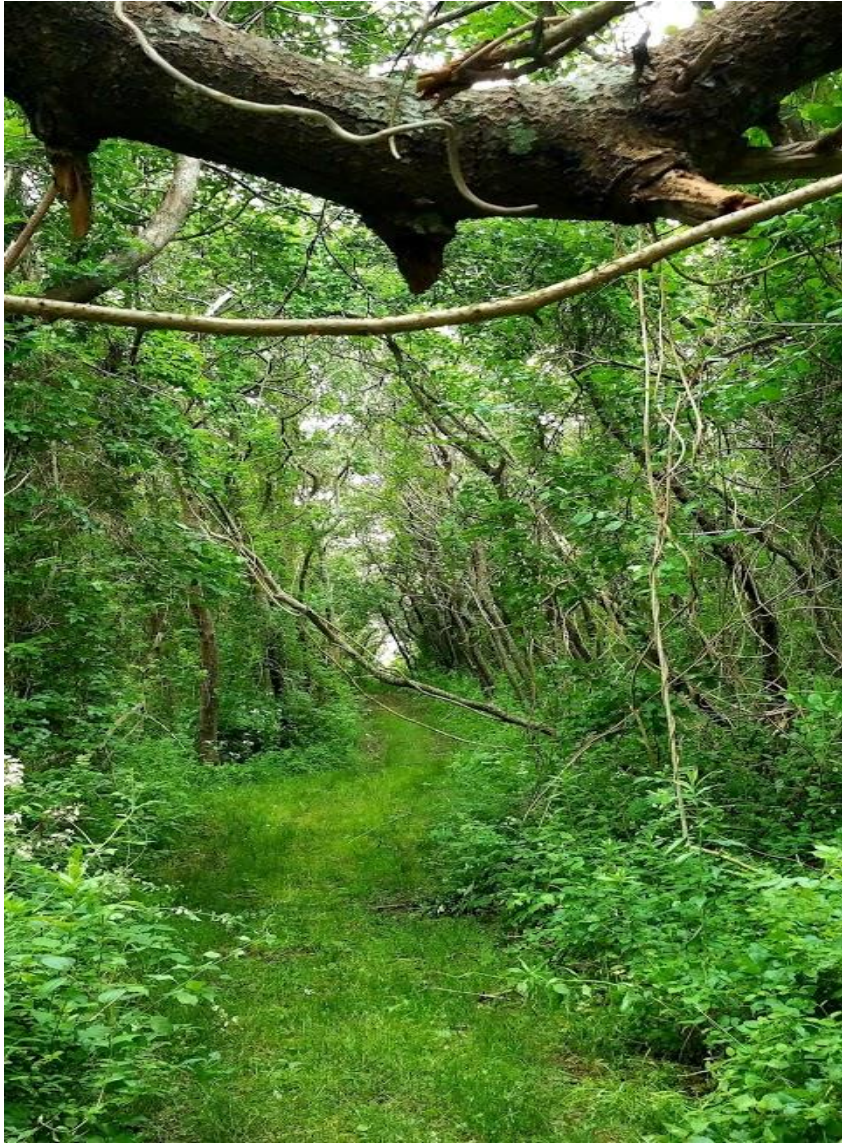
The rush in. So slow the out
there sea seems yet when
it reaches shore it swirls
powerfully, forces its way
under the old wood, it has
no color of its own, it gives
color to everything it's near.
And when it touches, ancient
wood rouses up again, sings
though you think that's just the sea.



O the god that came out
of someone's hands
and swept through the sea
swerving the water to me,
I stared into the movement
trying to see the stillness in it,
the part that must be he,
or she, the unmoving one
who makes all things move,
a color, a tumultuous absence,
a scroll flashed across my eyes,
and it happens, happens, god
is whatever is – and so quick.



The whelming,
 the wave
lifts to us
includes us, confuses,
brings us everything.
What comes to us
is color, colors,
those animals of the eye
the sun sends down
to know us, confuse us.
And here the muscles of the sea
flex and surge at us,
 at me
anyone who dares
to look now look away.
Stare at a picture of it,
the *fact* of it,
 factum, 'what is made'
it tells me all there is
is far away.
And what we are to one
another, even to ourselves,
what we are is distances.



The path
knows me.
Here I bow
my head
to my liege-lord
the tree
I call aspen,
might be another
altogether,
sire, an altogether tree
dipping low
to teach humility,
the democracy of green,
green everywhere.
And where it is green
it lets us go.

2.
I love this path
it leads me
time after time
into a living cavern,
a cave made of leaf light
leaf shade,
to go in there
is to commit oneself,
I don't know why
or how but the footsteps
don't lie – over tree branch

sea stone, root gnarl
they gather the self
into the heart of the woods,
dense woods right above the sea.

3.

To go along
down in there
is to go into myself,
not that I have
much of sea or much of green,
but I have shadow in me
and the little light
that makes the shade.
It is where outside
and far away seem home.



The things that look at us
up at us from where we walk
or would if we could
he walked on water though he was a man
and since that hour the trees look down
ever expectant – we may do it too,
since the sky is just a reflection of the earth
and when we look close up there
we see our own selves marching through
telling each other stories to make the journey
bearable from here to there, our journey
into the mystery of the leaves, those strange
quivering green birds between us and heaven.
In this picture, everything is complete
because we are not in it, not even our shadows
shimmer in water. It is complete
the way things are.

We are the only ones
still on the way to being.



The intensity of it,
the pool has trapped the sun
please let her out!
and yet she looks so beautiful
in there. Light trusts us,
admits us to the hidden world,
the things concealed in brightness,
cloaked in color, shimmer,
something like song. And it too
is something we take in, drink.
It quenches a thirst we never
knew we had, the mind too
has a throat and this cool stream
of light pours down. How simple
we have consented to be. *Fill me
with everything she means!*



**The little worlds are stars or such
spangled in our oceanic calm
a fury of vast existences. Each drop
of air encapsulates a planetary law,
body of custom, blue populations.
We are their angels.**



What I see out the window
is where the wind comes from
that lifts the light into any room,
breathing the curtain towards us.

I love this window, curtain, wind,
the soft billowing of experience
towards the growing child. We
still are children, how could we
not be, the world is so big, so old,
the wind comes from that huge
green flower out there they call
a 'tree.' And what is the wind saying? It
must be a simple word but important,
I hear it through my skin, supper time,
the sky seems soft and far away,
the day is almost finished with us.



The shaft of light
tinges, does not touch
the island. It gestures
to the middle of the sea —
for all we know (apart from
that treacherous tutor,
our experience) the light
could be rising, gathering
strength and focus, on its way
to say a message to the sky.
Who knows who lives up there?
I don't want to learn from experience,
I want to learn from beauty,
from this blade of intelligence
arguing through the night
up and down at once, why not,
wise men wear forked beards,
wise women raise their hands
each holding a different flower
as here the flower of the dark
is lifted and suddenly understood.

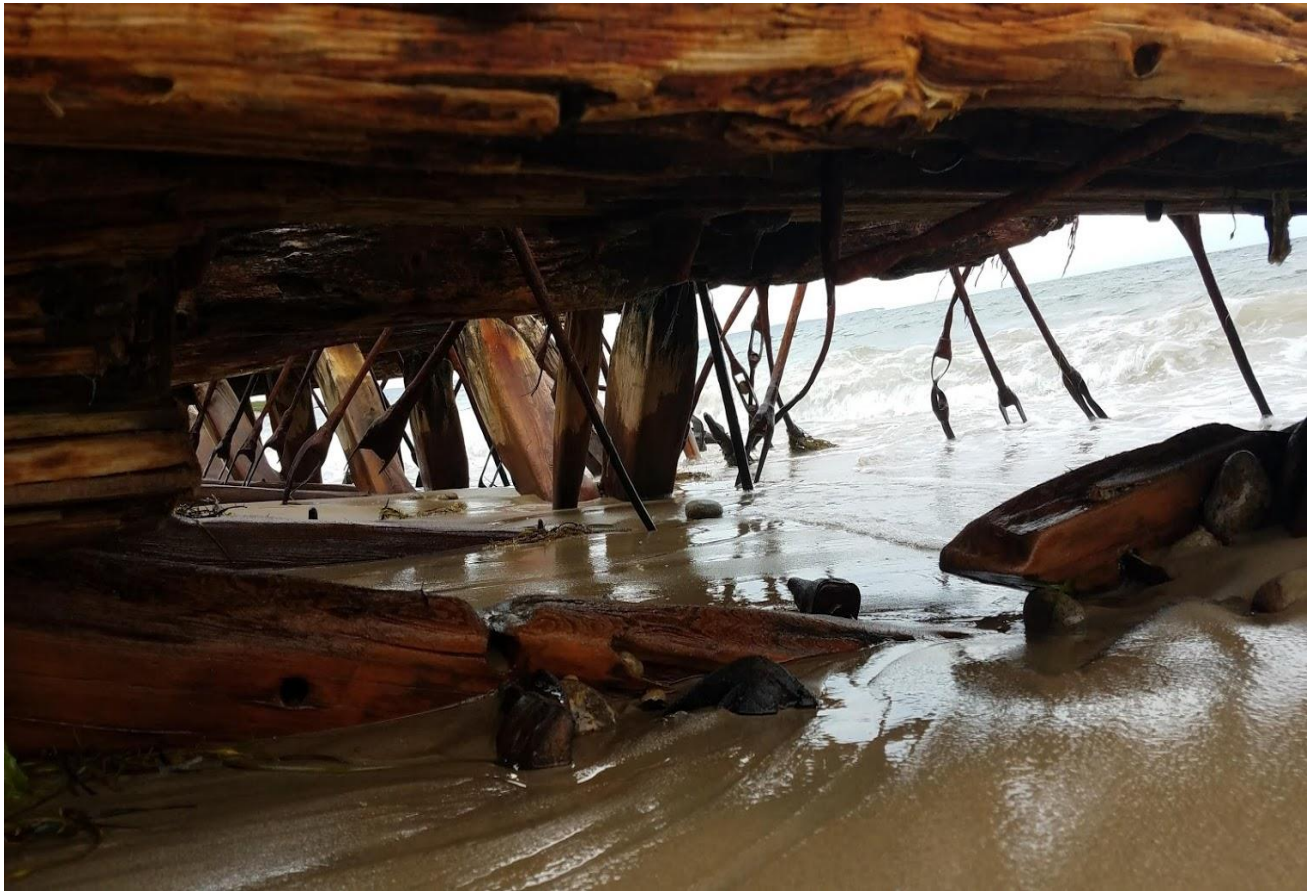


As if the world were not enough
the wave walks in
*I am higher than the sky
wetter than the sea
I also am*

because there are
mountains in our seeing
and we are brave in looking,
look, this comes to overwhelm you
now, by sight as once by water's
measure,

meaning all over you
*who dared to be
where I only am.*

Soon this all will turn quiet,
water is a mineral
and seeks repose.
The sapphire to come.



The sea wash under
the secret sea
hiding in old timbers
of the broken barges
the waves crept in.

But what I'm saying here
is not what I see, it's what I know,
not seeing the picture
but what the picture knows,
shows, the waves
washing in beneath the old
soaked wood of wrecked barges
on the beach called Barges.

But the picture knows more than that,
more than I know, it shows
a color I have never seen, the spectrum
bent round itself, the sea
absolutely still, pooled
for an instant beneath
something that grew up huge
long ago, out of the land,
mystery knotted in mystery,

ancient continuous heraldry of the sea –
shapes slip through the water
impersonating beasts, birds, our folk too,
mermen and mermaids lost

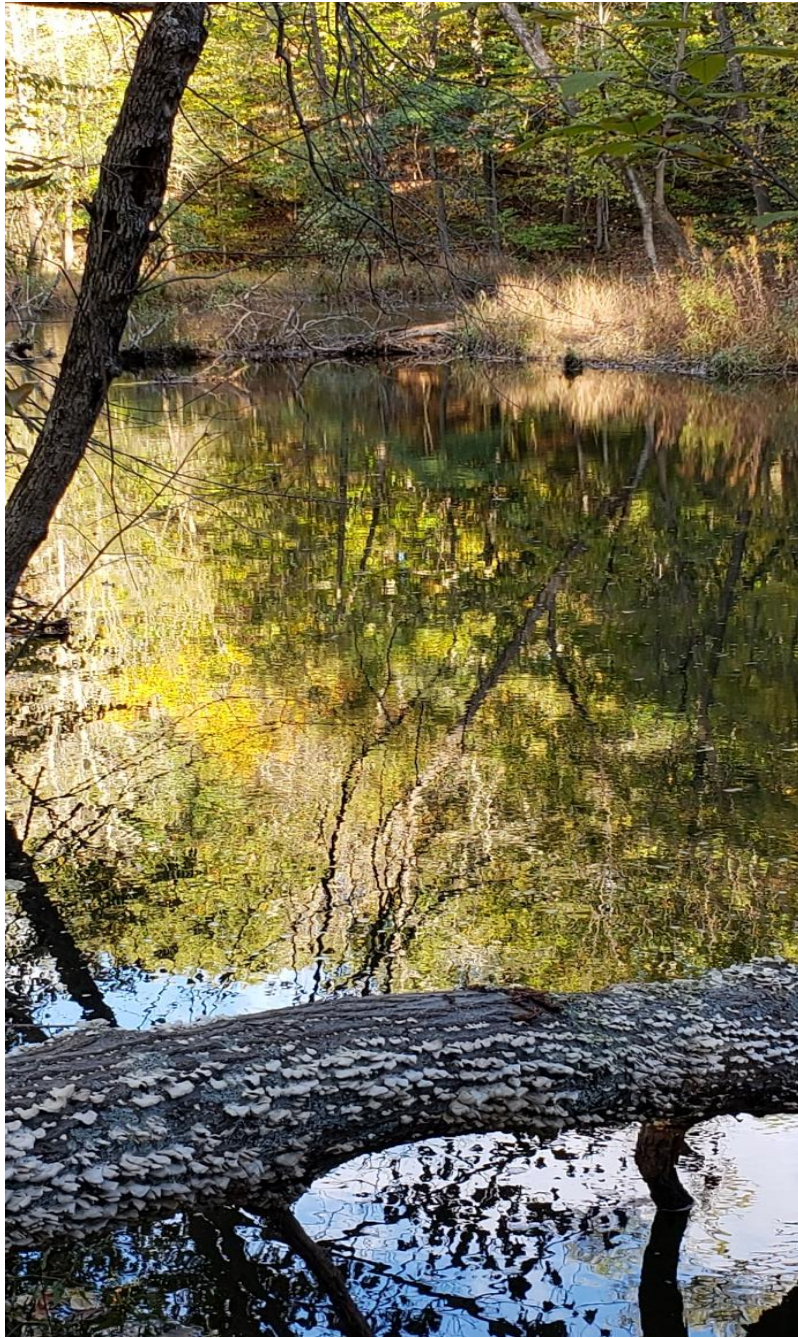
into the hungry spaces of the mind,
the mind that wants wonders and gets water.
Water knows what to do
with what it's given —
water takes on every shape proposed,
fills it with a self of light and quickness,
wakes us at need, sings us to sleep.



Magnitude of the given,
a whole sky in a pool
and room for something else,
something we made, something
ruly, straightangled, plain.
Leads me to suppose the sky
has room in it for us, however
boring our *da capo's*, our
tiresome repeats. And makes us
even beautiful in that strange
sheer unquestionable way
the sky is blue, the sky is blue.
Because it looks back at us
constantly, sees with our eyes,
knows everything we know
and one thing more. We look
at the sky and almost guess, look
at the sky reflected in some rain
that fell from it to help us see,
we look and look and almost see.



If I saw it only with my eyes
I'd miss a lot. Can't tell
reflection from original,
up from down. There is so much
to see you have to close
your eyes to get it straight,
take in all the leaves,
moves, antiphons of light
choraling through the trees.
Or is it water. Look again –
the sky is beneath you, you
may be the bird you hear calling
in your imagination. My bird,
my long confusion of up and down,
in versus out, the gleam
louder than the gold it's on,
the trees' quiet tumult. *Answer*
everything says. And it does.



This is all about across.
The endless looking that I like,
my favorite place is the far away.
And here it comes, giving itself
to me, wood and water, bark and sheen,
all this it has given to me, through you,
who give it to me by seeing it
and seeing it firmly, in color, here.

We have come so far to be able to stand
at this urgent little country stream
and take our time. This is our home –
strange, I've never said that before.
Maybe the water pools quiet enough
right here so I stop for a moment
being afraid it will wash us all away.

But now away is here, heron and beaver,
blue jay, ambling fox in underbrush,
the whole Commedia swirls around
quiet as this sun-lit pool that could
almost be a pond but we know better.
This is river. This is hurrying slowly.
As we are, to be here and there at once.



Now up is surely down. Dry-barked it
lies in water, safe as the sky.
No way to climb it. Walk on water,
fly on land, sleep in the clouds – that’s gospel
for you, how we need to be. And this tree
tries to show me how. But me, I’m such
a slow learner, it’s taken me my whole life
to learn to sit still. Now the tree tells me
*walk, walk for dear life, do the one
glory thing I cannot do.* Poor tree,
poor me. We are rich mostly in
what we see. Yes, that is a cloud
so it must be a reflection. What is a cloud
a reflection of? *Hospody pomiluj* we
used to cry in church, Lord have mercy
on us, tell us trees and clouds until
we do believe. Let the world impersonate
your loving architecture, let the beauty
linger always round us, let us live.



Here is scripture. A stone inscribed
from the beginning. Concrete, Roman cement,
limestone, quarries deep in the occiput
from which we get to say *it is written*.
How solemn stone is, and all things
that learn from stone how to stand
a long time and say what they say.
I keep trying to read the gouges, the slips
of some unknown chisel, digs, trenches,
scars. *Writan* meant to carve in.
And here is writing I can't read. Simple
as that, present and substantial as
this text is, I can feel it with my fingertips,
braille for the sighted. I'll try again
to find the sense it makes, or makes in me –
something about Egypt, cranes lifting stone,
maybe it's the stone's own story, river,
no priest but the perfected man, no, that's
another scripture, but no priests here,
poets and beasts howling at the sky, begging
the weather for answers. And answers come,
stone always answers, *stay*, it says, *stay*
close and love one another and you will endure.



And now we have entered the world
where everything is different. The patterns
array us, not the other way round. We cry out
Beauty! or What does it mean? when we should
be asking quietly the stone beside us,
the water flowing by, What do I mean?
Why is there so much of you and so little of me
yet I can't get away from me, I surround myself,
I look at the beautiful colors of your movement
and want to be them too. Scribble me
into your picture, o great world, I am tired
of being the rock around which you flow –
let me go with you all the way, let me know!



The little house of far away,
trees know how to get there,
lead the way, little
house open to the world
but hidden from the sky,
a human place, haunted
as all humans are
by animal spirits, ghosts
of the gone, phantoms
of the yet to come.
*Build a house without walls
and live forever* – the wise
woman said that, slipping
away smiling through the trees.