

*Words for Myself*

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Erika Mumford

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*Cover: from a Tanagra statuette*

But love, it is a durable fire  
In the mind ever burning,  
Never sick, never dead, never cold,  
From itself never turning.

—*anonymous Elizabethan lyric ca. 1593*



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## INTRODUCTION

**W**ORDS FOR MYSELF is a collection of poems written by Erika Mumford in the last year of her life. She brought them to the meetings of Every Other Thursday, a writers' group founded in 1980. We in the group have compiled them in her memory, in the sequence she gave them.

For several years Erika struggled against the cancer that finally took her life, and as she grew sicker we held the workshops at her house, sitting around the hospital bed in her study. She attended the workshop for the last time within ten days of her death, and she was writing these poems up until that time. To the end of her life she remained a working poet, concentrating on her craft and on saying what she needed to say.

The poems are remarkable both for the astonishing clarity with which she described her experience of illness and dissolution, and for the way she continued to look outward to her family and to the world. During Erika's long career as a writer she addressed many themes—nature, India, the Puritans' experience

in America, the experience of living in Nazi Germany, her own illness—and throughout, she wrote poems about her family and friends.

Though she wore her learning lightly and with humor, Erika was a scholarly poet, who had read widely in folklore and world literature. Her breadth of interest and her attention to form are evident in these final poems and fragments, several of which are written in strict rhyming forms. She viewed poetry as a vocation, and at the end she viewed it as a way to keep going. As she says in the poem “Four Babies,”

...I fill my fountain pen,  
write myself into the world.

This book is the legacy of a courageous, active, involved writer, who sustained her own life through her work and also immeasurably enriched the lives of those of us in her writing group, because of the dignity and generosity with which she shared with us her difficult final journey.

—D.M.

*Final Poems*

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## AUBADE

We wake to rain and the river,  
peninsulas furred with tender green,  
my head on your shoulder in the old way  
and the summer house creaking like a boat.

Salt water dripped all night  
into my veins, my bones  
float in it, washed clean of flesh and blood  
and eaten hollow by invisible mouths.

I slide one arm across your chest.  
Will we two lie here again?  
Sappho, dying, said  
tears are unbecoming in a poet's house

but I am smiling

## *ELM*

In the grey light of imminent rain  
a tree's in motion at my window:  
All day the elm was sinking into me  
each branch each leaf  
a "colored music in the mind"  
continually heard yet never wearied of.

How is it there is, suddenly, so much time  
to dwell on the tough, holdfast roots  
and leafy crown, its glide and sway,  
pause and return, the flow and fall  
of every living thing? The self,  
transparent and wispy as a breath,  
follows the bright green melody  
in all its branchings through the lacy web.

Image of God as infinitely small.  
The present moment infinitely  
magnified.

Vibration near the speed of light.  
What subtle intercourse, exchange  
of subangelic particles, what feast  
then gave me back my self?  
Immortal tree—oh angel of this place,  
the music was myself until it ceased.

## WOMAN FROM TANAGRA

*STATUETTE IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM  
FOUND IN A GRAVE NEAR ATHENS*

Little coquette from the underworld,  
eidolon: draped in the latest Phrygian mode  
your chiton's stained with muted  
but still gay Aegean blue.

Terracotta curls  
combed to a psyche knot under  
a wide-brimmed hat—whom  
were you hurrying to meet  
when death overtook you?

Restored to light  
you draw your cloak  
tight around your waist and maiden breasts.  
Your rounded arm gleams rosy-brown.  
The weight of more than twenty centuries  
floats mild as dust in a glass case  
on you, smallest immortal.

Caught in mid-gesture, like a finch  
glimpsed in a thicket,  
you view the fate of blood and breath  
with flickering shades of doubt.  
But I—oh in my grave  
I want just such a soul  
of clay, dressed  
to go out.

*SKETCH*

—FOR *DAPHNE*

Daphne, still fleeing, her fingers  
spilling laurel buds  
(carved beads of ivory)

Daphne, surrounded  
by lilies, surrendered  
to meadows of bluebells, Daphne

tall among foxgloves  
her wide-brimmed hat. Earth  
under her nails, streaks

of oil-paint—umber, carmine, the true  
azure of delphinium masking her  
among foliage and stems.

Bored with vegetables, “when you  
could plant flowers,” Daphne  
not content, never

content with the merely  
factual, her lilies  
are models for the real, the immortal,

the ever-blooming lilies  
that wreath the faces  
of her fierce loves. Daphne,



stubborn and rooted,  
veined eyelids like petals, brown eyes  
meeting the sun's glare

does not allow wilting or fading.  
Her passionate brushstrokes  
will let no one die.

## FOUR BABIES

Four babies from Peru  
swaddled in cerements the shades of earth,  
their faces embroidered with red cotton;  
glued to a board, with a ribbon  
for hanging up. Grave goods, the merchant said.  
Omens? I returned them the next day.  
Tourist items, said the merchant. From the airport.  
I paused. I'd grown fond  
of their slit, red-rimmed eyes and weak necks,  
their rudimentary arms. I brought them home,  
drab parsnips from the acres of the dead.

Daily, in their presence, I fill my fountain pen,  
write myself into the world: the perfect balance  
of the body responding  
to the motion of a boat; the scratch of granite  
on my bare back, making love  
on the radiant shore of Birch Island,  
or shivering on the bowsprit wrapped in fog,  
listening for the Nova Scotia ferry.

These were real, that are now insubstantial  
tatters in the mind, the self dissolving,  
put together each day with less conviction.  
Precision heaped up—larch, guillemot, rosa rugosa—  
against the vague withdrawal of the body,  
bone melting into blood, the spine  
crumbling under its burden.

And the omens? Those offerings to death,  
in their frayed smocks of brown and mauve?  
Innocent witnesses, the babies  
loll on their cradleboard: sickly,  
companionable, four humble ghosts,  
meek relicts of the world, the flesh, the grave.

## FRAGMENTS

### 1. GREEN OF LATE JUNE

The trees bow down, bow  
down and dusty weeds  
rise up to meet them. The wisteria  
along the fence sends greedy tendrils  
to snare what passes by  
and I, keeping my record,  
surprise myself by being here at all.

But is there any other place to be?  
America, the world, the universe  
—children addressing letters—

The emperor Akbar said  
seeing the Valley of Kashmir,  
“If there is Paradise on earth  
it is here, it is here, it is here.”

## 2. WHITE

The nurses wear white pants and flowered shirts,  
no longer bound to starched uniforms,  
quaint caps. Friends drift in and out  
on their way to the bookstore, the Cape,  
wearing new white shorts and blouses. They bring me  
the elusive flora and fauna of their—oh fortunate—lives.

### 3. FEET

My feet— last vanity—  
two bloated pigs.  
Elastic stockings, so tight  
my husband has to tug them on.  
I, who put polish on my nails  
and went barefoot all summer.

#### 4. PRESENT

Is this the same who, every morning  
reaches her arms out to her husband,  
looks eagerly out the window, and  
gives thanks for the enormous present  
of another day?

FROM THE LOGBOOK

—FOR PETER ON HIS 26TH BIRTHDAY

You stand barefoot on the bowsprit.  
Rain flattens the waves,  
the whole bay dimples with it  
—enormous black-white snapshot, inky spruce  
poking from goose-down fog around the shores,  
and your friend, your father and I on deck  
—boat tugging her anchor, tide  
running in fast—staring at where the dinghy  
was roped and now is not. Our link to land  
that bobbed behind, plump duck-shape. Gone.

We edge *Bright Spell* along the frothy shore  
as the squall rumbles out to sea  
and Passamaquoddy Bay fills up  
with Fundy water, gaze ourselves dizzy  
through binoculars at driftwood outlines,  
dim boat-shaped mussel garlands, when—  
“There!”—on a pebbly beach, filled to the brim,  
pale edges barely visible, the dinghy, rocking  
in the lift and drag of wavelets. A meadow  
ripples uphill to a farmhouse.  
Swim for it? Dark grey, the water’s deathly cold  
in spite of summer air. We shout.  
Nothing stirs. Nearby, a little river winds its way



inland, narrow and deep. A wharf?  
We nose the boat upstream and find ourselves afloat  
in a primeval forest, northern jungle,

where hairy willows sway and drip, drinking their  
reflections.

Firs stretch out knotted limbs  
to kingfishers with heads like hammers, flashing down  
on what flirts and slithers under the river;  
birches, thick as oaks, inscribed  
with dark rosettes of lichen, shake out armfuls  
of skittery leaves. Seven ospreys float above us.

Is it possible a wharf exists  
along this stretch of dream?  
We ghost ahead, blown by  
the lightest breath. Abruptly,  
around a bend formed by a head of granite  
and roots and knees of spruce, two huge machines,  
cranes vast as dinosaurs and more perplexing,  
rear up upon each bank, deserted, solitary.  
A low-slung cable snakes between them,  
blocking our way.

And now? Without a dock or rowboat  
how put you ashore to find the road  
that leads—we hope—to farm and meadow  
and dinghy? Soon the tide will turn,

drag the skiff into the Bay of Fundy,  
splinter it on the rocks or sink it—  
a birch, with an elegant upward bend,  
has formed a kind of branch-step over the water.  
Could you jump onto it before we went aground?  
Slowly, with minutest care, we turn toward shore.  
You leap, a deer, a dancer, grasp the trunk, foot  
gaining the step, and disappear  
amongst the foliage.

We laugh aloud  
at the plain joy and grace of it.  
Slowly at first, then faster  
we head downstream.  
After that fine beginning who could doubt  
the right road found, the dinghy rescued  
—its oars still stowed—emptied, brought back,  
the sun breaking through, color and light  
flooding the sea, the meadow, the charmed voyagers?

ON MT. TAMALPAIS

—FOR JERRY

Scythed by sun

wind

the high meadow  
of our talk

murmur

grey ragged eucalyptus

bone trees

stretching

into dazzle and cloud

sequoias

rooted in the ancient fault

and in the valley

mist

once we sat down

on a mossy log

there

was something like an amphitheater

turning back

had we crossed this bridge

over this creek? Trusting our feet

and in the mountain cabin

Molly

writing poems

your son still napping.

Years later  
handful of eucalyptus fruit  
rattles in my pocket

dry bones

sweet aromatic scent

spirals into blue  
walking alone together  
in spirit time

far light

little brother

# TOMMY

—FOR JEREMY

By the time he came to you  
he was a bear of character,  
plush fur a little worn,  
a scar or two.

You discovered his soul.  
When you confided in him  
he understood, in a way  
neither human nor animal.

Over the years he grew more distinguished  
—a few patches, and a pair of overalls  
made from yours, to hide them.  
His yellow-brown eyes became cloudy  
and wise, his person more flexible.

And the terrible times he got lost:  
nearly dragged off by the tide,  
nearly drowned in a river near Paris.  
Or simply meditating for days  
under the sofa, or behind a radiator.  
Once he was gone so long  
we got you a limp and woolly creature  
you said was a mouse,  
and named Baby. When Tommy reappeared  
they were inseparable (weeding him out

from dead leaves your father recognized  
“his threadbare back.”)

Why do I think of Tommy  
here by this sad stream where I kiss you goodbye?  
Something about knowing another  
with one's soul, about  
understanding without words,  
about the mortal game of hide-and-seek.  
Something about undying love.

## THE CROSSING

—FOR STEVE ON HIS 27<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

If you had hesitated  
I wouldn't have come.  
As it was  
I packed my faded flowered skirt,  
some blouses and a bathing suit  
and off we drove  
across the continent.

Each morning  
I'd bring you coffee  
while you lay under your red car,  
tuning it up.  
You loved its engine.

On the pebbly shore of Lake Erie we picnicked.  
Disturbing, a sea with no tides.  
I told you stories  
of when you were a baby.  
I laid out my childhood for you,  
and the lives of your grandparents.  
You talked of the Amazon,  
the jungle that spread its green flourishes in you.

On the banks of the Mississippi  
we ate catfish in a diner  
—fried puffs of air. The waitress

pretended to think I was your date. She said  
she could listen all day to our accents.  
The legendary river swirled and flowed  
and turned to myth before our eyes.

Along the Platte river, you read Mark Twain to me  
as I drove, and in Nebraska  
I wept to see the covered wagon tracks  
still crossing the prairie.

We drove late into the night in Wyoming  
across fragrant sagebrush plains.  
The little town we finally stopped in  
was black and shuttered from one end to the other,  
except for the seedy hotel. For some reason  
we spent most of the night drinking whisky.

We reached Salt Lake City one sunset:  
a Turner sky, mountains and clouds on fire  
all around us. Tender azure going to rose, to gold,  
to lavender, and passing us, a state trooper  
handcuffing a hitchhiker.  
On the shore of the Great Salt Lake,  
sepulchre-white, huge boulders spelled out names:  
Lisa, Ruthie, Ann. We never found out  
the deeper meaning.

Approaching Reno, the landscape  
became sinister. Was it the casinos



lining the only street of every town?  
The hotel where we lunched  
glittered and sparkled and rang with gambling.  
You lost a pocketful of quarters.  
There was no daylight anywhere.

At last, the Sierras.  
Would your little car  
make it up the mountains? We gazed,  
enthralled, at the side-routes for trucks  
whose brakes had failed.  
We imagined them going on forever,  
flying frictionless down the mountain.

After a week on the road  
we reached the coast and your college.  
I flew back in one day.  
Looking out the window, I saw  
we were crossing the Mississippi.  
I knew then how fast our lives go by.

*DRAGONFLIES*

—FOR SUCHI

I say, let me help you.  
She says, I can do it myself.

I say, but I warned you.  
She says, but how could I know?

I say no.  
She says yes yes yes!

I looked into the dark pool  
expecting to see myself reflected.

But what I saw were bright lotuses,  
swooping, shadowy fish, the swift dip of an otter.

And reflected, dragonflies, those iridescent darters,  
a bruised and stormy sky, a rainbow.

She stands on the threshold  
in travelers' clothing,

at the head of the stairs  
in a wedding dress,

stands in the midst of her life  
as in an illuminated book of "The Very Rich Hours"—

even her worst hours  
are a sensuous embroidered tapestry.

I have been fortunate, in one lifetime,  
to have been given to love

those who are in my likeness,  
and one who glows with fire and is wholly other

and most dear.



# *Unfinished Poems*

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*(SOME LINES ARE UNCERTAIN)*



I

Rise, walk, clutching the walker's rail,  
lower myself painfully into the easy chair,  
ask for books, writing paper, lunch, in the jail  
of myself. Say thank you. Smile. Despair  
—pointless, destructive—but oh how  
not let it well up, hot corrosive, beyond tears,  
though I live—live—in the present, now—  
sheer fury against the loss of all  
that is vivid, swift, spontaneous, the fall  
into acceptance, rape, ruin of the years  
that should have been—and pointless to dwell  
on—voracious for immortality, mad—the cell.

## II

Would I become holy, a Mata-ji  
of the Himalayas or an anchoress  
like Julian of Norwich  
living in a small stone cell  
beside the church?  
There was so little left of me  
and that little felt transparent.  
I talked, a disembodied voice.  
I saw as though engraved in stone  
how my friend  
had given his soul into his true love's keeping  
and strayed about, soulless,  
how another was losing her husband  
through mere unkindness.  
Should I tell? Cassandra  
of the rumpled sheets.

I couldn't believe  
my husband still wanted to kiss  
this bloated, red-eyed face,  
I shrank from any touch. Patient  
he read to me,  
rubbed my back with ointments,  
emptied my bedpans. He knew  
I would come back.



### III

and while he is washing the breakfast dishes and she is wiping the kitchen table he says, continuing their quiet conversation, but you know, Dr. L\_\_\_ feels you should make up your mind to have the medication and she says, you think he means it is advancing rapidly. Yes, I think he thinks that, he says. And she says, but it's odd, originally, the prognosis was quite good. Yes, he says. They don't know what to do with that fact. In spite of having been wrong, it still seems a good thing, a kind of talisman, that the prognosis had been good.

#### IV

How wrench out of myself what will not come?  
God, must I turn round and round the core  
And out of habit smile? But I am numb  
With calling the child that hides, the more  
I come close, touch, try to pry open the trap  
When the roots of herself break and twist  
And bleed into my body: unreachable, asleep,  
Suspecting no cell of harm. Bruised, my fist  
Makes neither dent nor sound. My cry  
Can't be heard, echoes stupidly. I'm alone  
With one who is deaf and blind, and I will die.  
In the dream the road winds down and down  
And a horse rushes toward me with bared teeth  
And my ribs break with each drawn breath.

V

—IN THE HOSPITAL

Losing all track of time  
I [unclear word] a poem,  
the edges of the continent  
curled toward each other  
spanned by a beaded feather,  
a rock crystal flashed light, music  
moved me from moment to moment.

Is this really me  
unmoving on a hospital bed?  
If not, who?  
If not, where am I?  
Stranger than anything  
it is me.

I heard the stories of my friends  
as though an opera were sumptuously unfolding, taking  
place  
before me: the exiled princess  
who would not suffer any coarse fabric  
to touch her skin. The bringer  
of a wise, round-eyed, tiny silver owl  
who offered bread at Delphi  
to Athena. The child  
who sat down on the bed  
with her continuing complaint  
“he’s such a jerk”—

All entered me  
as through an open door,  
and the full moon  
crept up my window.  
Was it delight or despair I felt?

I held onto my crystal, my brimstone, my feather.  
I let go of my self.  
The God that can be named  
is not the eternal God  
I whispered over and over.

## VI

She sees with a new clarity  
and so dazzling, even in this light  
the gray of imminent rain, three trees  
in motion at her window.

On her right  
a birch in full dance of all its catkins,  
a slender chandelier the lightest touch  
sends into tremulous motion.

On her left,  
a young elm in a veil of tender green  
against black, arching branches,  
not yet grown stately  
reaches restless fingers to the wind.

And in the center a white pine  
flourishes shade-green plumes—

How is it I have, suddenly, so much time  
that I can spend an hour or more  
claiming the trees? The moment—now—  
expands to form a cell  
and I am weightless, drifting  
above the street, the trees.

I can do anything I want—read,  
take a walk, look inward, cook a meal  
and all the time there is is mine  
as long as it is present time.

*[New page: continuation or new poem?]*

Speak about the forbidden subject.  
If she were to be truthful as some have been  
—and what, after all, is death?  
What is meant by “facing” death?  
Which has no face.  
Neither the face of a monster nor of a mother.  
Whether if she digs deep enough she comes to fear,  
a cold, still pool  
in which she will be baptized  
until the waters close above her head  
then only—and even so  
it must be done over and over again.  
The pool is too deep.

At age twelve she sat on a park bench  
and imagined her death.  
Terror gripped her, held her for months  
and after she had writhed and struggled and inwardly cried out  
it let her go free.

She can imagine drifting into death,  
the blinking off, one by one, of all her lights  
and she alone and without passion  
drifting out of his arms and out of the eyes of their children,  
their helpless hands.

No, it is not fear. It is the sadness  
of being able to claim the present moment only.  
What she must imagine because she will not live it.  
Her children’s graduations, weddings, her children’s becomings,  
her grandchildren. How would it have been

to sail around the world with him?  
To spend a winter in their farmhouse in Maine?  
To grow old together?  
To write more books?  
To walk the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Katahdin?

*[New page, probably a continuation]*

She is a spider, spinning the future  
out of herself. For her oldest son  
—oh, bursts of color, forms  
brought forth into the world for the first time.  
And that the world should acknowledge this.

And for her second son, joy—  
the joy of balance on a shifting sea,  
wings lifting to the breeze. The image lightly touched,  
before it happens, at the point  
of its dissolving. Grace.

*[Incomplete]*





*From Other Volumes*

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WHAT THERE IS

—FROM *Witness and Wait*

We heard the surf before we saw it, white  
Against blurred gray: a sudden lift,  
Muslin brushed aside, and from the mist  
An island swam—still indistinct, just roused  
From its cocoon of cloud—stretched granite arms  
And shook an osprey from a spruce tip. Dazed,  
We dropped our sails and anchored for the night.

Next day we walked to the island's edge  
From rock to rounded ledges,  
Like playing leap-frog on the backs of whales  
That had been beached so long they wore a pelt  
Of tawny-pale, crackle-work barnacles.  
Are there more barnacles or stars, I asked  
In the world? You laughed and drew me down  
To where a sandy crescent curved  
Past cream-and-blood-red roses, to the sea.

Then swimming naked in that stinging broth,  
That tongue of arctic ocean,  
And later, veined with salt  
You kissed up from my breast, I felt  
The earth's life like a supple skin  
Stretched on the bare bones of the universe.  
What we call *beautiful* is what there is.

WORDS FOR MYSELF

—FROM *Willow Water*

The needle sinks in. Cold  
snakes through my veins,  
chemistry that kills to heal.  
The doctor chats of skiing, how he glided  
along the empty, blank expanse  
of Commonwealth Avenue after the snowfall.  
I carry home a needle-deep mauve stain.

As a child I had a nightmare of my mother,  
a black bruise on her breast  
that spread and spread until it smothered her.  
Next time the doctor will say, kindly,  
did *I* do that? Surprised,  
I all but take the blame.

In the glass that night  
I hardly know myself.  
Life-saving nausea? Drained  
from head to foot I dream  
a branch of flowering peach  
covered, leaf to stem  
with mirrors glinting light.

It is the branch of speech.  
Quicksilver tongues  
that echo mine, or mock,  
sparkling cascades, my disconnected  
nightlong talk.

It is the branch of praise  
I hold today.  
Already the bruise fades:  
Past, future take a form  
That any dream can give.  
The lifelong, deepening present's  
the tense I live.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**E**RIKA MUMFORD was born in 1935 in Geneva, Switzerland. She spent part of her childhood in Germany during World War Two. In 1946, when she was eleven years old, she emigrated to the United States and lived in Worcester, Massachusetts. Erika graduated from Radcliffe College and received a Ph.D. in comparative mythology from the Celtic Language and Literature Department of Harvard University. She began to write poetry while working on her doctorate.

Erika was an editor of *Dark Horse*, a poetry newspaper, and she taught at the Frost Place Poetry Festival, at Robert Frost's home in Franconia, New Hampshire. She belonged to the Poetry Society of America and the New England Poetry Club, of which she became a member of the board of directors. She won several awards from the Poetry Society of America. In 1984 her poem "Ashram in Pandukeshwar" won the *Poet Lore* narrative poetry award, and in 1987 she was co-winner of that award for the poem "The White Rose."

For her sonnet sequence, "Passages," she was one of six finalists in the 1985 International Observer-Arvon Foundation poetry competition. In 1986 she was the recipient of a Massachusetts Artists Foundation Fellowship.

She published poems in several anthologies and many journals, and she is the author of three books: *The Door in the Forest* (Green River Press), *Willow Water* (Every Other Thursday Press), and *The Karma Bazaar* (Taylor's Point Press). Erika lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her husband and four children. She and her family also lived for extended periods in France and India, and spent summers on the coast of Maine. These locations provide the settings for many of her poems. From 1980 until her death in 1988 she was a member of the writers' group Every Other Thursday.



*Words for Myself* is offered in Memory of Erika by the members of Every Other Thursday:

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