

Words for Myself

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Erika Mumford

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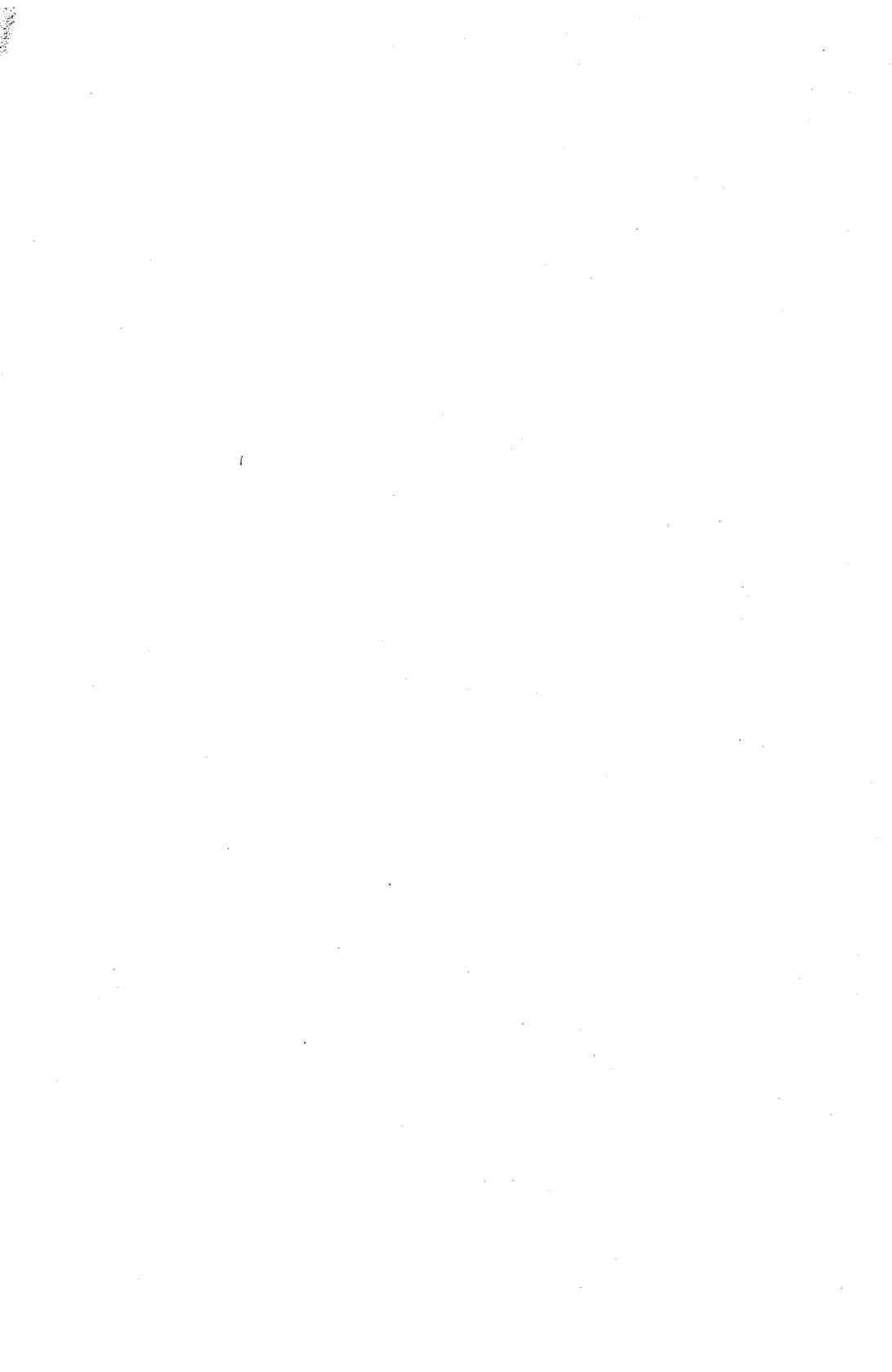
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Witness and Wait.

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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

WORDS 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

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 27TH 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

(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



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

ERIKA 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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