



LIVE ME
A RIVER

poems by
helen lawson

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Also by Helen Lawson: Women As I Know Them

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LIVE ME A RIVER

Poems by

Helen Lawson

The Blue Spruce Press



Never so

Wriggle-worm eyes,
face pale, search-me-mouth,
carved free, controlled,
walk towards (fear tender lipped)
kindness, (me.)

Acrobatics of one moment
infinite
convolute.
Circles distorted,
you, lines
disrupted,
greet
me,
having greeted thus
a woman many times.

My clogs clonk under me.
Am I all
tight skirt, postmenstrual
nights-minus-sleep-
loose flesh?
We meet: never so.
In my mind only
now held,
I kiss you, like
a grass blade
beneath your feet.

House-painting

As I pull my hand
from the magnet of the
telephone,
I put on a record
of Wallace Stevens,
to feed me
with beauty.

What I want from love,
I snatch from
poetry.

High Priest of the ladder,
as you dip
your brush into the paint
to smear it
on the patient wood,
I greedily wait
here
for your awkward hands
to touch me.

I know

what I am doing;
you do not need
to tell me.
I wish to
ravish you,
capture you,
eat you, embrace you,
and your timorousness
increases
my fury.

I have loved you a year,
mouse-quiet.
Now I want to dance and sing
with a man worthy of my
curtsy,
and the laughter
which has gathered
unexpectedly
in my fingertips.

A miracle

Oh, your smiling eyes,
those love-birds,
fluttering into mine!

Mine only that moment,
happy for me in honey
gulping you.

The orifices of your nose
mine to fill
with kisses.

Your stubby fingers
baby-like
clutching my breast.

Gone are your stone
walls, those jagged
glass fences!

I'm limp under your lips,
brainwashed,
dull with wonder,

risen
from a dead valley,
in Ezekiel's chariot

carried by you,
unbelieving,
into heaven.

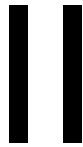
Usurer

In one hand you knew me.
Two fingers poking my
cheeks, with index
and thumb you summed my slack
belly. Bald palm
pondered the thigh
and the scales toppled.
You smiled, counting
my veins, subtracting
scars.

Holiday in fantasy

Doors and footsteps,
child's wail sustained
two hours,
the rabbit we bought
in New York City last night
kept on fresh ice, its skin
folded
in the waste bucket.

Maid knocking on doors,
bringing guests coffee
and Danish. My husband hurries
off, label
"Speaker" on his lapel,
its red ribbon
taking my fancy, while I,
a kept woman,
loll in my bed
with you filling me.



Uncertainty

I walk between two walls
to an unknown meadow. I am
asleep. Magic is pulling me.
There is only air ahead.

Shall I find trunkated
gulls on tree-stumps, or
will you be there, gathering
for me marigolds?

Ecce Homo

We cling to a
condemned window,
air sonorous with
lilac.
Stone steps fall on
alcoved groins;
it is Easter.

Let veiled balconies
voyeur with gargoyles.
Hear the incensed
organ in my breast
thunder your welcome.

Thumbelina

Leaves not yet turned,
you fuel your snowplough.
Oh, darling, allow
dew to fall; do not sow
ground frost on our uneven road!

See the hand with the plucked
magnolia hanging
from the sky? Your girl
perches in it, Prince Swallow,
moribund in Hades.

Petrified Mole's Ever-
Bride, expert mice
ruffle her skirts. The hole
is blind. The miniature woman
gropes for summer.

Common

Oh, Jesus, I am wet with love,
such a terrible thing this river
where I have fallen!
My shoes are useless with it;
it is becoming winter.
My daughters will dry me
with their hair, but
where shall we sleep,
now the house in underwater?

Memory

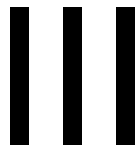
The fish
appeared for us,
glittering.
The skipping-rope in me
was yours, too, a barer
handful of gold dust.
To prospect the dark waters now,
brooding, drags stars down.
They briefly clap their fins,
then mist
and gloomy slopes
ice-fold them
in a platform.

Swinging

Touched we have, and now
what? Shall we allow
winter to separate our
clinging in air before
sleep, the glow of first
waking skin recalling skin,
all perishable and already
floating away in space?

Of you again fear in day-
light, grey sun parading
flaws, all edges rusting,
but rawest of all insincerity
pausing as woman. This is
the ravine that bars from orgasm,
oriental apple blossoms haunting
Fords and Buicks.

Timing is valid in love,
but blunders equally precious.
This poem, too, spurred by
biochemical stirrings, a few
pirouettes in the ear, a
sex-trapeze swinging, finally
wind the only acrobat,
bard and listener.



Trying to come to grips with reality

The man next door does not buzz his radio;
I have slept with my feet up; now the kettle is on for coffee;
children shout outside but this is my place, that's what
I wanted: seclusion. Time to piece together broken edges.

A little girl with chunky cheeks stares from her First
Communion photograph. She holds a long candle. The Virgin
Mary is on it. She is a world contained, but what is the purpose
of this, the dusty apartment and my neglecting the children?
The cake Philippa made is good. I was saving it for my honey,
but he fears I'll paperclip his nostrils and sell him
in the marketplace in a cotton sack of paprika.
He has forbidden me to display my petticoats,
nor did he deign to count lusty eyes on my peacocks' feathers.
He will not be hid by merry wives in dirty linen,
nor will he Falstaff his Irish genes before the Prince,
I turn frog's haunches on the world, spawning poems, but
he decorates his porch with banners, saints' bones and other relics.

When I stamp and spit before him
he notices that not uncommon spectacle
and yawningly turns to Hemingway as the one reality.
My poems he locks in the bottom-most drawer
to burn them at the end of the spring semester.
I am of course the Lamma woman
coiled behind the bushes. He guards his Achilles heel from my
fangs. Please come down, my Hollow Man, through the ceiling like
a devil. What we have is not ethics, but the sea we have become
and the moon and the pull between them.

So

So I shall sandwich you
between the visit of an ugly female friend
and taking off to the hospital to see my daughter
who broke her jasmin jaw,
when I, like a bull let loose,
ran the car into a telephone pole.

So. The pain will not be long, I should not fret,
a few clumsy swayings in the game of tug-of-war,
before the net falls and tightens.
I want none of it;
it has lasted too long,
the carrot before the donkey,
the painting of the dishes of delight
for the tongue to dip into.

Give me one whole healthy *no*
a comrade clap, a handshake,
a slap over the buttock that peasants give
and I shall in return offer you
bread, fresh out of the oven,
smiling coarse salt, crunchy caraway seed,
a gift from my Christmasy past,
dormant and moist, like crocus bulbs
before your window.

Summer sale in Hartford

What are you,
a butterfly
skimming the earth,
or are you an arrow,
a street sign
pointing caution
round a steep bend?

Yesterday I saw
a man gesticulating wildly,
a Latin,
waving his arms
over a little pot with astras,
thirty-five cents, sale price.

I thought:
How beautiful
to care
for a few orange flower-heads
before a dingy shop!

This is the nature of my thoughts
all the time,
when you,
my butterfly
and my arrow
are near me.

Mere words, Hugh Ogden

You ask me to write a poem,
so I smell an orange and look
into the mirror.

The air-conditioner fills me
as if I were a tunnel,
a hollowed passage, somnolent.

Rain must feel like this
or a knife, a carcass,
that stone of mere flesh.

This, because the one I love is
silent. All sense has ceased in me
and poetry, too, danced off

to a remote hillside,
curtsied briefly and
disappeared.

Dream of midsummer

Titania loved an ass
and I love you.
Being immortal, I come
to you through closed
doors, invisible I slip
into your skin's sheets.

Strong head on my lap,
your dream of tools contains
me also. I, Queen of your
lawnmower, ignite dead battery,
my finger sparks off the tired
wire in your animal brain.

Most treasured brute, you
clamber through midsummer
passion-empty, trampling on
moist moss I sent for us to
lie on, carpet us to
fairyland.

Polar landscape

it is simply the madness of the snail
the periwinkle laughs at what he has
told me so tenaciously the way rose
petals are spun nowadays a disgrace
the death of the radish too all to be
treated individually you must understand
the disease affects the muscle lagoons
where brain cells swim like stars remain
intact at first i made him come back with
my feet he said the little bones resisted
groaning now you see to that i have
been abandoned the khyber pass this
bed where zeus descended my underfeathers
gone in flames the north sea slobbers ice

I have said good-by to you cruelly

Where are you now, my dear friend?
Hunting among your young man's
few foolish hairs,
beating your chest before the altar
of imagined passion,
huddling in your own arms embrace
in some pallid motel-bed,
staring at a television screen
and seeing a dead face,

conscious only of the staccato
of deranged visions,
a weird sound galloping through
your brain, whipping your lungs,
too, into a canter,
an illusionary hand pressing
the bellows of your panting
which you no longer recognize.

And I have said good-by to you cruelly,
for I have a bare nest and you have none,
for I still want to taste a little,
though I hoard nothing,
while I plow with my own hands
through a field of stubble,
so that my children could hide like grouse
among the wheat I still have to sow.

A tree house

As soon as I enter, I want to embrace you.
This place is yours and you do not know it.
My skin has held you long; it knows you despite
the distance. You have simply exited
as before, during the rehearsals.

But I sob for the chickens of mirth we might have
played with together, and for the ocean diving
you could have had, the vistas through the flesh
into the spirit. Left, I am a sweeper of roofs,
a fence-sitter, miser of hornets' wings, a pedlar.

While you unpack your knapsack a la Lionel
Trilling, I whistle to my own ear. Call it
a folie-a-deux. Spring with its bombs is
approaching. We shall clean and plant
and sorrow will forget itself.

Telephone journey

We talk.
What's really happening is
we want to hold
onto each other longer
in the undercover clasp
of semen-sincerity.

It's pussywillows near a
brook in thoughts of you,
the frost's blast now a steel cloud
of moon-smile's pale
lips, yours,
my river.

IV

The tempest

Not a whore of myself,
tiptoeing timorously
in the street-lights
of bondage,

I can
throw
all my gathered sheaves
up the prickly branches
of time

and laugh
under the skin
of Prospero,
a Caliban gathering
twigs
of my own choosing.

Age of Aquarius

An alcoholic
and a woman without orgasm
shacked up together,
wanting to make a go of it.

Divorced and middle-
aged, he grey-haired,
she, abdomen gutted in scars.
Stars shone on them.

They tilled separate fields,
and during summer vacation
travelled, rested, not forgetting
children who kept close watch.

They set off aged forty and later,
dragged out of a pit by each
other, then grew peace ferns,
prospered like the sea at noon.

A secret sharer

Everything he cares for,
I also love,
music - butterfly of thought,
air-wave within nerves' ganglia,
and books - forest of light,
food - sexual yes to dreams.

A still walker, he
crosses me daily like a laser beam,
the mystery of him neverending,
for
a secret sharer
inhabits his cabin.
A two-fold man a spinning center.

I know that in myself
I must trust, but
his essence
has become me.

I wish I were a young girl

I'm repeating to myself
the alphabet of your body,
words round curves, pauses
in grooves, the exclamation
of each hair I rub against.

I walk in memory
the familiar curve of your spine,
alcove of your armpit,
rough road of scar,

and no longer feel sad.
But wish I were
a young girl to delight you!
Even then I'd not be
lovely enough for you.

Victory

pity the woman she grabs you on your
way to a doctor still pretty now
posing as jolly so many months ago
stripped off the shirt she has on
you remember her breast you sucked it
she wants to pull your sad glasses off
to see you better every day I waited
for your voice time sprawls between
lovers a cabbage she cuts you with
glib words your mouth twitches
on waves of green revenge she sails
away red-panted the air before her
a golden ball she a princess again:
she knows you captive

My father's house

I would like to climb a mountain
and with a child's hand draw
a picture of a house, with a
child's eyes look far across
the valley, with the arms of a
child embrace my mother,
lips on her olive skin,
smooth, joyful.

My thoughts would be hushed,
rested. There'd be honeysuckle
blossoming near us,
and a river.

For Verena

she said do you want to move with me or do you want to
talk and a door opened yes I want to move in a poem where
skin and muscle and retina meet language of senses denied
waiting a woman of fifty a mother ship that had sailed cold
mists seeks sun gets it plucking gently when fruit calls
ripe a guru colette dancing
this on the first freedom Saturday of few background
noises edge of the in and out thin lines blades and juices
dividing
your foot to make my steps easy that's what i seek
as you remember eight years ago for me a journey through
darkness to when this body was harassed as child then back
to what is left to hold
that surprise leap of laughter

On arrival home from visiting a successful female friend,
divorced, but sensible

Those two people will
talk about me
my broken marriage
and how I'll never earn money
writing poetry
though he's a poet of a kind himself

I'm tipsy
on their vodka
in orange juice
the moon is red and large
around the road's curves

The psychologist
considers it possible
my new serenity
is an expression of past hostility
masochism still

The telephone
keeps ringing
as I write this

Am I envious
my friend has a friend

who now lives in
seriously

My future is a
watermelon in a distant sky
I am loquacious
bright
lonely

Colonial

Madam, give me black women any time,
fat and coarse, thick-lipped.
In dream streets they waddle,
grumpily animal-like. I have
heavy thighs and could train
my buttocks to billow in cheap
pants. I also carry the splendor
of Puerto Rico in me, being a
fortress at which waves lap.
I collect swords of Spanish
invaders, whips of Moorish
traders and own a Jeffersonian
skin that contains southern hues.
In this white colonial clapboard
erection I live mornings. Otherwise
my house is ministerial. I sleep
late and will not admit I love you.

V

Disturbance
(For Ian)

What do you propose,
I ask of the clam, being
a seaweed, bobbing.
The trouble is he is I,
and silent, baring
the minimum of flesh
in low tide.

Years of nets and motor-
boats buzzing, hurting
the ebb of what the bay
could have been, a tapestry
of waves, view of an island,
hemmed by rocks, teeming
with miniscule creatures.

This a midsummer fever
that hit us? Persistent flies,
yachts clasped by atmospheric
stillness, sun cloud-biting,
mist haunting firm grass,
the goldenrod before eyes unplucked,
blind to its gold, the haze-lash.

Summer heat

When I go away from you,
tree-serrated hills,
don't let me forget you!

I want to remember also
how this morning
I walked,

breasts and feet
naked,
in this field.
My skin found itself at once.
Blue veins
and downy hair

stood up to be,
so naturally,
as if I had grown

in the heat of the equator
and never knew
better.

Me and my poems

My previous bundles of poems
and all those motley feathers of words
beside the typewriter, falsely conceived,
unloved,
pitifully faceless, but clambering for adoption,
all these are me.

Me, who in a frivolous dash took love
by its horns, who as a child stared at childbirth
of calves, who pulled moons and folded horizons
at her will.

Me. And who will understand my poems?
You, whose necks hiss secretly after the gander
of coherence? You, that dare to dip narcissi
in the alcohol of detached folly?

I shall love me, though I am made of rejects,
lowly and a no-good metaphor of pretense and obscenity,
from my own dung I shall start downwards, or upwards, no matter,
my silence more intense, my mask fierce.

Suddenly justified

The house is suddenly justified
by the presence of so many people in it.
It contains no Puerto Rican cockroaches
nor bedbugs from another underdeveloped country,
though it is far from perfect
and, like its inhabitants,
patched, peeling. It bulges.

We wait for spring to embellish us.
New grass will smooth our yards,
a face-mask the nature-woman puts on
when she wants to be laid.
We meet other cynics and go round
in a coffee-mill fashion,
reciting each other poetry,
feeling safe for a moment
from the torrents of time.

The noise in the pipes
provides a symphony
in winter. Fever enters
the flesh, elevating
it from the mundane sweats
to the glow of a sweaterless Venus.

Stars must also be somewhere.
We look at them no more,
heading horizontal under car-roofs
after appointments, keeping ourselves
repaired, teeth, glasses,
cleaners for our clothes,
and the jobs we do, swaying
on the stilts of meaninglessness.

If one of us falls in love
or is similarly afflicted,
we bear him patiently along,
for the passion will be spent,
we know, the funeral pyre burn down.

Such are our days
and we want nothing from posterity.

Is it time?

The ridge
of a half-bitten
apple,
the sweat
of our flesh
still living,
shadows and lines
criss-crossing,
poetry hop-scotching
backwards:
once there was a time
for lullabies.

Now your swarthy
leather-jacketed
manhood
prospects my land and
horses.
Beyond, air thickens.
Is it time to
join hands and
leave the hutch
empty?

This year

This year I shall not
send you a Christmas cake,
that ugly conglomeration of raisins,
nor your favorite jammy pastries
you used to make
by your mother's skirt,
using her Siberian thimble
to give the tasty rings
red eyes.

This year I shall not
snuggle secretly into the den of
what once was;
I shall not smother you
across the snowy American plains
with the confetti
of my hunchbacked longing --
because you took a moist calf
under your shirt to warm you,
because you clutched on female legs
not to drown.

Such is the cruelty of hurt;
leave me.
I shall walk with my heart in a cast,
unjostled,
like a babe in an oxygen tent,
breathing blue.

At YADDO with another poet

We stroked a Siamese pussy
and talked of our divorces
by the Xmas tree in a small
northern town. The cat lay
on my lap. We nearly touched,
purring, despite the great to-do
about freedom. You helped me
buy Brewer's Yeast, to
start the New Year,
two teaspoons of it in orange
juice. In African lamb fur
I felt a bear, kept glasses
on to frighten you.
Then ping-pong. You won
two out of the three games,
both of us so glad to while
away one hour. Your scattered
lostness scared me. What relief
to lose you next morning for good.

Body only

The moment
when a plump chair sits down in us
and we plunge apple-round,
the sun in our veins;
we rest.

A moment only:
mosaic of gold-plated leaves
and the humming of thought-traffic .
arrested, poised on one toe.

The moment of yellow trees,
of palms lotus-like humble,
of freshly smiling heaviness,
of body only
at last.

Bread in a basket

A stocky woman,
tongue accent-tied, heavy
legs green with varicosities,
skin loose, fog-fallen,
grey like thistle
growing in her hair.

He reaches for her
as a farmer does
for bread in a basket.
She fills his void.

Hands

The dialogue between us continues
though I have unloaded the cart
Snow blocks the telephone receiver
The items on the list remain
unanswered Listen to air
dreams my body strikes
All is hushed What happens
is a code of atoms Storms dump
rain on us The anxious tone in you
is tomorrow's man I no longer write
poems on you We are

Glass shaman

A restriction was placed on you,
A "Sold" sign, but perhaps I could
Tattoo you with poetry - your own words
Awesome iris artifacts, fragile,
Blown by a timeless craftsman.

You were leaving. I reached to kiss you,
Held back on impulse as ridiculous.
Me kiss you - Taster of Tender Flesh!
Your strong eye had already darted past me,
Dear Water Diviner, Appraiser of Intensity!

Already jealous, I grieved defloration,
The past gold of my leaves. Let's then be
Spirit lovers, merry, with cunning hands
Reaching past highways. I hear yours
Hum to me pink as I hold you, free.

Helen Lawson is presently teaching English at Indiana State University. She is a member of the Center for Independent Study at Yale University and the Poetry Society of America. She is the author of a previous book of poetry, *Women as I Know Them*. Of her poetry James Laughlin (New Directions) has said, "There are many good qualities in the poems which I admire, a great sincerity of feeling and a nice discipline over language."

Cover photo by Roisin Whelan