

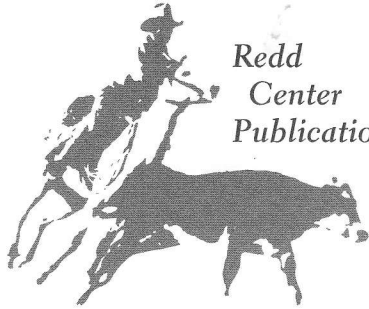
STONE SPIRITS



POEMS BY

Susan Elizabeth Howe

STONE SPIRITS



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Publications*

Stone Spirits



Susan Elizabeth Howe

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FOR MY PARENTS,
Maralyne Haskell Howe
and
Elliot Castleton Howe

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Susan Elizabeth Howe's Western Landscapes

AS THE TITLE *Stone Spirits* suggests, rocks are prominent elements in Susan Elizabeth Howe's poetic landscape: "great/ arches of sandstone," "red stone . . . broken/ and deep," "stone ripples broken like shards," dinosaur bones "fossilized to brutal hardness," desert varnish panels incised with ancient rock art, thousand-foot cliffs whose exposed strata teach "Lessons of Erosion." Even the eyes of hungry deer in winter are "dark caves," and the chickadees have "diamond hearts." The hard wisdom derived from this rocky land is encapsulated in the message of Howe's "ArchAngel," a massive formation in Arches National Park with "great curves/ rising out of her back" like wings but with her feet forever "trapped in the bluff":

*The world is harsh,
not of your making,
beautiful and dry.
Do not pretend
it can't kill you.*

The angel's declaration, grounded in western experience, is a world away from the Romantic pantheism that has dominated American nature writing since Emerson and Thoreau. Aldous Huxley, in his 1929 essay "Wordsworth in the Tropics," argued that Romanticism could only have developed in an environment like western Europe or the American eastern seaboard, places "so well gardened," so shaped to the human measure, that they "resemble a work of art." The idea of a benign spirit inhabiting the woods would have been impossible to maintain, Huxley insisted, in the tropical rain forests. Or, we might add, in the slickrock canyons of southern Utah. More than one spiritual heir of Thoreau has perished in the desert because of a blind faith in the benevolence of Nature. The linking of "beautiful and dry," or the stark realization, in "Lessons of Erosion," that "Few things are less personal/ Than how the land needs you," aligns Howe's poetry rather with such a predecessor as Wallace Stevens with his insistence that the natural world is both beautiful and alien.

Howe's West is not limited to the arid canyonlands but also extends to the cow-casino-bordello town of Elko, in the dramatic monologue "We Live in the Roadside Motel," and the urbanized valleys of the Wasatch Front, where

*We live on the bottom
of an inland sea, gone
an age ago.*

This superficially domesticated landscape contains the poet's nostalgically evoked childhood home, a generic-suburban house situated "On a clay shelf/ Overlooking the valley." But the wilderness is never far away. It can be found, as in "Feeding," in a pasture or orchard at the edge of town where hawks and owls hunt their prey and deer and cougars come down from the mountains in search of food, and where we are made to recognize that we are all predators.

Elements of the western landscape attach themselves to other objects of Howe's vision. The mountains of "Mountains Behind Her" extend from the Rockies to the Himalayas. The Georgia O'Keeffe painting described in "Summer Days" is an assemblage of western motifs: elk skull, desert flowers, "hot sandstone mountains." Passengers in an airplane flying west from New York City are "ignorant as salmon/ the eagle has picked out." Western space and geologic time are projected to cosmic space and time in the unsettling lines of "Things in the Night Sky":

*We are surrounded by ancient light
We can't see, come millions of years
Through space we can't recite.*

Yet as with the West, so with the cosmos: we are driven to shape the environment to a human measure:

*We have always imposed ourselves
Upon the sky. We say darkness grows
Or gathers, as if it were a crop,
Name planets for ourselves, our gods.
And through the night, draw lines
That aren't there, connect stars
Into semblances we can survive—Lion, Hunter, Swan.*

Space and time can be internal, as in “The Paleontologist with an Ear Infection,” who hears through his bones a wild cry from the age of the dinosaurs. Or in the hollow lacquered-wood Indian tiger in the Victoria and Albert Museum, sculpted in the act of devouring an Englishman, alien cultures imposed upon alien nature. Or the inner spaces of the Statue of Liberty, symbolic woman constructed by men, doomed to bear the heavy unremitting burden of “the status of icon,” but hollow inside, with tourists climbing stairs through “the place where my sex should be.”

It is apparent from the broad topical and thematic range—including meditations on birth and death, on love and loss and suffering, on nature and art, nature and ethics, on the sense of menace and the necessity of risk-taking—that Howe’s poetry is not regional in a narrow sense. But even when its subject matter ranges most widely, there is always something western in the perspective: western light, western distance, western confidence. Each poem in this remarkable first collection represents in its own way a “hike to the spires.”

—EDWARD A. GEARY

STONE SPIRITS

I. *The world is harsh,
not of your making*

Things in the Night Sky

First the deepening of elements we long for
Like myth, forgiving experience into patterns
We can scatter, random as stars.
The call of a bird lifts its own coolness,
Music like *weep* and *few*. Bats awaken, fly.
The vast, hollow dome evening is becoming
Reminds us we live on a planet and can endure
Absence, where we're moving,
Though not without incidents
Of light. Intent, we study darkness
To learn metaphors for light.

We have always imposed ourselves
Upon the sky. We say *darkness grows*
Or *gathers*, as if it were a crop,
Name planets for ourselves, our gods.
And through the night, draw lines
That aren't there, connect stars
Into semblances we can survive—Lion, Hunter, Swan.
But stars, immense, burn and burn
And luminous galaxies spiral
Beyond our planet's small noise.
Their gravity would call us out.
We are surrounded by ancient light
We can't see, come millions of years
Through space we can't recite.

As for what will help us, perhaps
To lie flat against the earth, look up
Till we can see things in the night sky.
Gravity is all that keeps us from falling
Out there, beyond where it is possible
To consider who we are.

ArchAngel

Stone spirit
a thousand feet tall,
she watches in this high desert
over great arches of sandstone.
With two companions, presides
in sacred valleys the Anasazi knew.
I had come before,
an earlier pilgrimage,
but missed my angel
because she was hidden by signs
naming her one of "Three Gossips"
and striking me blind.
But I learned the truth
and returned, though authorities
at the visitors' lodge
discouraged me with questions
of erosion and the cryptobiotic
crust. "She is not eager
to help you," they said,
"having her own struggles."
And then there are matters
of worthiness." I came ahead,
climbing out of the morass
on hairpin curves,
arriving before her
just after sunrise.

She turns her face from me
but blazes forth,
an archangel studying dawn
for all the power
of light. She shows
me her wings,
their great curves
rising out of her back,

as though her grandeur
proceeded from her self.
I hadn't considered her pain—
her feet are trapped
in the bluff; she eats salt
to match my bitterness;
the sting of sand
always burns her eyes.
Layers crumble, year
by year, from her lips.
She speaks to me, and
this is her voice:

*The world is harsh,
not of your making,
beautiful and dry.
Do not pretend
it can't kill you.*

I will wrestle my angel, free
climb her skirts, toehold
by toehold, angling my ascent
across her stomach, around
to the great wings.
If I reach her ear
before I am thrown down,
I will demand my birthright.
“Break from these stones,” I'll say.
“Give me my name and teach me
the physics of sunrise.”

The Wisdom of the Pyrotechnician

Bombs are the biggest
fireworks, so you could say
my family makes bombs and this is war
we turn on and off, ceremony
of war. Not easy to handle this grid
of electrical complications—wires
to fuses to shells in their mortars
waiting to explode. Nor without danger—
a spark can spit from two pebbles,
from pliers tossed in the truck,
to set off the fuse of a rocket,
which could flash and fire them all,
turn the field to chaos and gas
and us, smudges at the center
of our own unintentional sun.
Clairvoyant before such dazzle,
I see always two futures—
one where I run this show,
one where I flare and funk
like a Christmas tree under a match.
My brother went up in the warehouse
after a day of mixing,
his charred body next to the shovel
we guess he dropped. Our work opens
glittering pink chrysanthemums,
red green silver peonies, weeping
willows of gold. Family recipes, secret,
for rich purple sparks, blue light. I mix
by hand, not even a wooden spoon,
knead saltpeter, sulphur, charcoal
to gunpowder charges
that lift and burst the aerals.
Sometimes I am coated with fine explosive
dust. Then I tremble
at all the fire in the cosmos,

atoms to galaxies, fury
to love. Last week a woman
bandaged across the cheek sobbed
at my red-tipped comets, their gold
streamers raking the night.
A couple blazed in the bed
of a pickup—that human flash
as my meteors crossed the sky.
What caught me was one man
who stayed for the dark. Downwind,
he let embers descend on his shoulders
but sheltered his sleeping son.

Flying at Night

Although we are putting it off,
the New Year is coming. Midnight
in Times Square, the dropping
of the electric ball, will find us,
we hope, in Utah at ten o'clock.
Meanwhile this hiatus—
hours at once passing forward
and back, and we hundred passengers,
seeds in a tight pod.

Our pilot has flown far north
into Canada around a storm.
Even so, we're harrowed
by a two-hundred-mile-an-hour headwind
in seventy degrees below zero.
The blackness out there
thickens like cloth,
far below interrupted
by a brilliant gem—
some city on the edge
of one of the Great Lakes,
the dark pool slicing away
its patterns of light.

Then a barrage of stony air.
The plane jolts through. Ice chinks
in my plastic glass, and I wonder
what friction between molecules of air
is forming what imbalanced fields,
and when the whole churning mass
will spit out its electric charge.
Air travel, someone said,
is hours of boredom interrupted
by moments of terror.
This we pretend

not to know, chattering in the tight
lozenge of our jet, hoping
those blank square windows,
like the calendar ahead,
will fill with land and light.

We watch the movie, ask for complimentary
champagne, float along in the current,
ignorant as salmon
the eagle has picked out.
Is death chance, or the fact
of the bird's eye? I tell you,
there are forces building up.

Feeding

I am walking my puppy
through the end of a winter
day as cold and distant
as a mountain brush fire
ready to go out.
Sunset is the dangerous time
when everything feeds—
hawks hunt across the pasture,
an owl begins to stir,
just yesterday a cougar
followed the deer down.
The dominant animal, I
fear neither for myself
nor for my dog, though
even now the air is slit
by needles of ice. I've held
Griffin back but let him go
sniffing across the field,
scissoring into the orchard
and out. In the field
he is a spaniel, chubby,
chocolate brown, in the orchard
a shadow, slightly denser
than the margins of shade. In
and out he goes, ghostly,
real, stupid and happy,
runty as the rabbits,
the great birds' prey.
Until I call him back
he'll play at hunting field mice.
But the whole frozen pasture
flares between us, burns,
as Earth tilts away
from the famished sun,
and I hear crows descend

on the trees, darken
the veins of limbs
like clots of blood.
Those carrion-eaters,
pickers of bones, open
dark fields of sound
so vast I can't hazard
the distance to my dog but
again and again spin
to my blind side, fighting
off what hits me like
a swift, keen hunger.

Alternatives to Winter

One bitter dawn, walk
in the orchard
while light gathers
the deer. Calm as visions,
they raise their ears,
claim you
to forage with them
on thistles, frozen bark,
their eyes dark caves
you enter to learn
not to starve.

Or chickadees,
a black-capped family
frenetic in the pines.
Clown with the young,
their comic faces,
as they learn the serious
work of picking seeds,
their diamond hearts
primed to spark
through the clarity
of zero degrees
each fourteen-hour night.

Or come in.
Take off your coat,
sit down. Griffin,
my springer, will sleep
on your feet, stretching,
his belly exposed.
A small weight
to warm you.
Dreams take him off
where he shudders,

legs stiff, and faces
some terror that shakes him
by the throat. Touch
him along the flanks,
the chest. You are the one
to tether him, guide him back.

The Paleontologist with an Ear Infection

I am hearing through my bones
Older noises you don't lean into.
This morning's shower beat upon my skull
Till I was clean as an echo,
Sentience with the dust knocked out.

In the lab, a buzz and scrape rise in my back
As I fit vertebra to vertebra to the bony
Plate of the triceratops, its lumbering spine
Fossilized to brutal hardness still aquiver
Beneath my hands, inside my ears.

Now it is a hum along my jaw.
How can a cry heard one hundred
And thirty-five million years be old?
Always this beast feeds. The howl
Of the mortal fights its way out and in.

Tiger Eating a European

Most exquisite toy, whimsy and revenge,
plaything of a maharajah whose compliance—
bribes of money, spices, jewels—ended at his eyes,
who retired from the British to provinces of art
and ordered his craftsmen to begin.

Now in the Victoria and Albert, it is a brilliant prize,
lacquered like the Indian sun—wood-carved echo
through strategies of silence. For the life-sized Englishman
lies stiff upon his back, pointless toes thrust up at the sky
beneath a Bengal tiger that crouches and defies.
Inside, the animal is strong and hollow. Music
makes the tiger growl, the European scream.

Nor Am I Who I Was Then

Far north in the county
On a clay shelf
Overlooking the valley, the house
Where I was raised holds up
The house you see and
In this way survives
Vagaries of ownership,
History, and reinterpretation.

Once modest, lower middle class,
Still it was one of a kind,
Its freshness
Green-speckled bricks
Set in maroon mortar and
Maroon-stained posts and beams
Supporting roof and flat-topped carport.

The effect was like silver-
Green pines in red dirt,
Or exotic red-leafed lettuce
They serve in fancy restaurants.
But the roof of tar
Spattered with gravel, roof
Where I myself have walked,
Is dangerous now, pitched steeper,
TV antenna gone, and covered
By standard thirty-year shingles,
Regular and buff as brick
That has grown below
Into sprawling rooms and garages
Enclosing whole lawns
Of my imagination.

Lessons of Erosion

To hike to the spires, you climb
Over two hundred million years,
Language and breath your sacrifice.
This is no temple. Everything growing
On red stone you cross, broken
And deep, twists against light.
Splayed and shredded juniper trunks
Show you to adapt, so you match
Your stride to the scars
That split rock, the path rain
Took down the stone face
Into the wash. There is no water,
Just its memory: a gouge
In the escarpment, dry bed below.
Ripples over sand become stone,
Stone ripples broken like shards.
More ruin waits for weather—
Cloudburst, blizzard, ice.
As you walk in this high, hot air,
Sun sears color into cliffs, and
Breath comes dry from your mouth.
Silken and lush in your body, a drum
Full and tight, water throbbing
Inside, you are learning
The long version of silence.
Few things are less personal
Than how the land needs you,
Saliva, blood, bile.

II. *The blues out there*

Mountains Behind Her

When she appears
There are always mountains behind her.
The spring before the climb,
Rockies are the background.
She trains a young horse, delighted
By his form, by the strength
Of the circle she holds him to
With halter and rope. At that moment
She is the source
Of all the world radiating out:
Energy infused
In the colt, the split rail
Fence and the rising
Mountains, the last shapes
The camera will hold.

Later, in group shots of the five
Climbers on Everest,
She is the one you notice,
The woman, hair a thick golden rope.
Soon the five become puny
Creatures clinging to the juncture
Of ice and sky, but even then
She is the fulcrum that balances
Two climbers on either side,
Pinning the sky to the earth and creating
The whole. A long shot,
Ice cliffs too vast,
Except for her reality.

And then the close-ups. Her hair
Hidden by a tight hood, the bullet
Of her skull. She is heating food
In a tent on a twenty thousand foot ledge,
The earth gone
Vertical above and below.

Next morning, the narrator says,
She awoke first, crawled outside
The known space of the tent,
And disappeared. The documentary
Must run without her. She is an
Absence in every take, in every
Frame; she is where imagination
Goes, where the mountain finds her.
All things take her shape, though
She left no footprint in the snow.
The camera tries to focus
On the four who are left,
But the shapes blur and slide.
As for the others, the narrator reports,
They never reach the summit.

Summer Days, *A Painting by Georgia O'Keeffe*

The skull of an elk is the center—parched, cleaned
Of flesh, brown and white whorls
Where eyes and nostrils used to be.
Three-pronged antlers curl out of the head
Like our best thoughts, pointing out
Where things are and what we do
And do not know. The skull floats in the vacant
Sky, a mirage as deep as life, antlers
Earth-brown, darker along the curves.

The skull broods over the living
Flowers, the rest of the mirage, bright desert
Blossoms of yellow, red, mauve. Sturdy and
Delicate, they pull us in like a heart
Beat, like love. Pull us as far as we can go.
Behind skull and flowers, the horizon
Marks the limits. Hot sandstone mountains
Range under a sea of clouds as here and there the sky
Pools. We want to see forever into
Summer, but boundaries hold.
Brought back to the center, we belong
To the mirage: Above a brief flowering
Heart, behind our own faces, wait
Eyeless sockets and the silent, imminent skull.

The Stolen Television Set

At the Seaview Retirement Home, the elderly
Came to believe life would come
Through the screen. Like light on waves,
It reflected their faces, blue-green in bright
Shifting patterns, reflected their eyes
As now and later passed. So in the night
When someone cut the cord, lifted the Wheel
Of Fortune, Jeopardy, and all the stars, stole
The show, they lost their umbilical, outside connection
And light drained off, leaving them exposed like
Fetuses in glass jars.
These elderly are facing the crisis.
They sit in the televisionless lounge, cough,
Stare at the harsh blank walls, shrivel
Slightly, wonder where they are now.
No one can say how they yearn
For the liquid, blue-green light only yesterday
Filling the room, flickering waves
Stretching and wobbling time, the steady
Throb of comfort like a dark, first home.

In the Cemetery, Studying Embryos

The dead around here
were conceived a long time back.

To imagine the family of skeletons
under me, rigid and flat,

doesn't help me fathom
how each could have swum

into life. But a fetus—tadpole
at four weeks, thumb-nail-sized—

grows gills and a tail
at the end of its spine. And the five

little headstones tipping under
Jonathan Greshom, honored father,

and Miranda Hartshorn Greshom,
his beloved wife, recall

cells clustering and splitting
into the little form.

Limbs like flippers
paddle into feet and hands

and at last the tail winds up
inside. And though the family here

wither and harden, traces of skin
and tissue leathering their bones,

each child had its day
to float in the warm sac,

suck its own thumb, squeeze
and twist its umbilical cord,

loopy and roped, and roll
on its back. A blanket

of water muffled every sound.
For example, Miranda's cries

for her other babies would soften
and waver, fluid, awash.

And the embryo's eyes, just holes
in the head, closed tight

with the first stretch of lid
and didn't open for months.

Perhaps the first womb
that surrounds us is spongy

and dark as the loam
where we finally sleep,

and to float in mother
earth is another suspension

of sensation and sound. Then
the skeletons may be waiting

for a shift in the earth's flow,
for the nourishing liquid signal

to fold in their arms and,
translucent and budding, curl up.

To the Maker of These Petroglyphs

Chipping your lines into stone,
you made these figures gods,
or men-as-gods, their masks
and horns, straight shoulders
above slim, potent loins
the very shapes of power,
of dread. I call you, shaman
artist, who drew gods
from the rocks and pleased them,
giving them form.

What you imagined
became the very thing:
the abundant scattering
of tiny, essential deer
as random and complete
as I still find them
in meadows and thickets
below these cliffs along
the river. And at the center
of your ways, the desert bighorn
coming one by one before the gods,
to be sent on to the mortal.

The sheep grazing the mountains
trace the same mystery
as the sheep scratched on this rock,
and I have seen reappear
in the new season
these gray, shaggy visions
rising through the canyons
onto the high plateaus.
When you brought them here
they were great spirits saying,

“Kill us. Eat. Survive
another season.” Images of sacrifice
you wrought before your people.

O maker, you who, by these glyphs
became an Ancient One, I am late
a thousand years to invoke
your simplicity, your strength.

Still I ask, please come.

I offer you a basket
of ancient, shrivelled corn,
taken from a moqui hut
I found. What have you
to say to the breaking
heart of one sad woman
from a worn people?

I watch our men-
as-gods, but their masks burn
and glare. They have taken
the sheep from the center;
they give us no sacrifice.

How can I draw truth
when images they speak
spill and trip
like light on ripples
and show a people shattered,
never whole?

Another Autumn

This pear is the shape of my womb,
I think as I eat a ripe one,
new crop. The harvest has been hurried
by early rains—outside my window
each long pine needle ends
in a perfect drop, suspended,
unwilling to fall.

I imagine Eve
gave Adam not an apple but a pear,
the forbidden fruit a yellow pendant
gracing a dark bough. I would repeat
her choice: all that static perfection—
cheetah, leopard, lion grazing field
after field, their teeth green with cud;
tusk of the boar, claw of the grizzly
soft and unformed. That they didn't kill
meant nothing; they were unequipped.
But to have razor-sharp talons
and choose not to strike—
that would be love. And that terrible
male, his side still twitching, blooming
with desire to tell her who she was—
she gave him the fruit, gold-skinned,
sticky, to release his true nature,
and then to help him die. Seed,
she hoped, would save them, fruition:
seasons pass and all nature fulfills
itself.

In August my neighbor's cat
snagged a hummingbird from the sky,
so my neighbor threw his pet
against the house. But autumn's
abundance—and thoughts of death—
might make us less brutal
and give us courage to sacrifice.

Outside, maples glow with color
after rain, their tender spinners
months ago released into the wind.
And look at this pear, seeds
a perfect star, because I sliced it
crosswise, through the heart.

Sexual Evolution

We live on the bottom
of an inland sea, gone
an age ago, though each night
the sea's ghost rises
as sun sets over us
and darkness edges its way
up our eastern mountains,
the ancient shore. Now the surface
pauses a thousand feet above,
and waves again lap terraces
they carved from limestone cliffs.
Meandering to the park,
my dog and I become elemental
life forms crawling the mud,
mollusks sucking nourishment
into our pliant muscles
under their crust
of shell, a barrier
against the complex evolution
going on above, where fish
have maneuvered for eons
toward species that breathe air
and crawl.

How relentless the path of life
to greater danger, more pain,
and a brain to feel the wound
that always comes.
Now the sea is everywhere, or gone,
as darkness fills up spaces
abandoned by light. And species
have evolved to whatever animal
hides in that dark cave hollowed

in the bushes. Injured doberman
or big cat—what has set Griffin
barking his brutal bluff?

Just two kids, young, maybe thirteen,
who have chosen this park to strip
and try their sense of touch.
Stunned, they rise like fish
twist and flap, their faces blank
under the misshaped moon.
How thin the human chest
under face of boy or girl,
how feeble the cages
that hold their jolting hearts.
I turn away, call off my dog,
their exposure not my intended
act. The girl is pulling
her shirt on, the boy
lifts their blanket
like a cloak. Neither knows
the earthy path of accident
ahead, or that they have broken
the surface, washed themselves up.

We Live in the Roadside Motel

Five days in Elko in January
for no particular reason, except
our broken truck. Transmission
froze up and we're stuck
till the company sends the parts.
There's an empty cattle truck
out back, a windmill beyond.
I find new Wranglers
in a drawer, call three times
and leave a note, but the maid
doesn't take them away. She keeps
making the bed. The clutter
spreads anyway, what with wrappers,
clothes, and cans of beer.

This morning in McDonald's, an old guy
says, "The mines have sent this town
to hell. But what do you think
of a place with only two rape trials
in fifty years? We've got
houses full of girls
to take care of that." So later
I walk most of two miles, slick
boots and skimpy hat, to see
for myself. Ruts of ice wave
up side roads, ice crystals plink
the air, and when I breathe in,
my nostrils collapse. The ladies
live behind Stockmen's Hotel
in P.J.'s Lucky Strike Bar,
Sue's, the Mona Lisa Club—
cinderblock and neon and covered windows.
I stop and think I've always known
how fronts can help you lie.

While we crossed the salt desert
I watched the sun, weak as a pill,
white, flat. I looked right
at it without black spots
breaking up my sight.
Then at Wendover we drove out
of the fog and the temperature dropped
fifteen, twenty degrees. End of day
and light spilled out across
the land. The blues out there
of mountains, fields, seemed real
as any bruise I've ever had.

When I get back,
you have staked out our bed
for a poker game with Harlan Gibbs,
the guy in the next room,
cowhand out of Rock Springs,
and his buddies from the bar.
We're losing money we don't have
but you tell me to shut up.
I sit in the corner, t.v. on low.
One a.m. and you send me
to the machine to get some ice.

This motel is all angles—cement stairs,
iron rails, iced-up parking lot.
Extension cords snake under
doors and into the engines of cars
and trucks. Ahead, I can't believe
I see a baby rabbit hop
before me into a blind hall.
It cowers in a corner in a ball—
I might be the predator I'm not.
I just leave it,

despite dogs, crows
on the highways after dawn,
coyotes slinking around.
I can only hope for burrows,
crawl space, or even
chinks or cracks
where soft things with tender
bellies can hide out.

III. *I hold up the damn torch*

The Big Tradition

When you marry into this family,
they ask you if you want the works, and you say,
“Sure, whatever’s fair.”
So they crack the ice
behind your eyes,
open bottles of the big tomorrows
for everyone to have a healthy glass.
You drink it, but it’s very dry—like air.

Then they get out the old shoes
and make you feel the slippers,
touch grandfather’s boots—the iron heels
are not worn down at all,
hold the threads of knitted baby shoes
unravelling where someone walked
the whole country. (So they tell you.)

When it’s time
they take you to the bedroom,
and you hold the four-poster
while they pelt you with the grain.
Wheat and corn and oats and
unhusked barley.
And then they cry and tell you to be glad.
Their heads all turn at once
to watch you answer.
But you are well-prepared.
“It’s fine,” you say. “Red skin looks healthy.
Nothing bruises long.”

You say it because
this is how you earn your marriage,
And you *will* have your place and just reward.
All the really good homes
start with echoes in the study
and all the close relations there
to smell the crystal rose.

What Takes the Place of the Body

A widow, she trusts her house
to preserve itself while she's gone,
but cracks in the pipes,
lines as fine as the network
around her eyes, give way. She opens
the basement door to a flood,
only the top step not lapped
by waves. Her first thought
is her children, who are gone,
then memories bobbing up
from rooms below.

“The dolls. Our beautiful dolls,”
she cries, stripping off shoes
and clothes, stepping down
into the dark pool.
All the years stored there rise
so she can't descend but floats
to a memory she fears—not the lumber
of her son's hockey sticks,
her husband's fishing poles,
nor the seaweed her daughter's
prom gowns have become.

She slips through without tangling,
floating toward babies,
her first—twins, who slipped out
early, snagged her insides.
She floated then,
turning her energies in,
not mourning so she wouldn't die.
But at Christmas she saw the dolls,
and her numbness leaked away.
“We will never,” she told her husband,
“give our girls such lovely dolls.”

Immersed in this other medium, she thinks,
My own body failed my children,
and searches the surface for dolls,
her husband's present,
brightest foil beneath the tree,
soft as her missing daughters,
the size of the empty cradle of her arms.

Now they have come back,
rising, lost children insisting
on attention for themselves.
What can she do but swim
toward them under the joists,
over the dark flood
where they have floated for days?

But imagine the bodies, sopping,
fabric crumbling
and the glue gone, imagine
as she touches a little arm,
how one doll disintegrates—
rubber limbs and head adrift,
torso unravelling
into thick cotton rope.
And the other doll before her
still in its own shape,
soaked with her desire,
the dark liquid working
on her children and herself.

Appetites

When I was fifteen, my thighs pale
as lemon chiffon
in a graham cracker crust
(the family dessert we called flub-dub),
sex was the ice cream truck
Mom taught me to ignore—
eyes ahead, stomach in—
its calliope sweet and sticky
spinning back. In the same way,
my parents tensed
when we passed *La Caille*, gourmet
restaurant meaning quail and French
sauce.

Food we could afford
went to the freezer to shrivel,
develop that grainy frost-burned
taste of cold. I had to lick icy
lumps, peel the skin off my tongue,
to get any flavor, gravy or pot roast.
In men I chose glaciers
moving slowly down great heights.

Years later,

hungry, near home, I look at
my folks shoving salmon and crab
into the old compartments, arranging,
pushing things back. Their cherries
meld, marble-hard, frost eats up
peach jam. *So much food*, Mother says.
I'm afraid to open the door.

Then my hands

turn into my mother's
tools. Bony knuckles,
fingers starting to gnarl,

I pick at ice for freezer-
burned enchiladas and Fudge
Ripple Deluxe. And vegetables—
ice-laced Oriental stir-fry.

As I search the insides for pastries,
meat pies, I ask myself what I have
savored, if this is all
she tasted and touched.

What if we could eat snapper, slick
from the sea, grilled in the juice
of limes. What if we sucked cobs
of fresh corn until butter dripped
in our laps. What if we spent whole years
fingering cuts of meat, kneading them,
muttering *pork chop, pork chop*.

Liberty Enlightening the World:
The Statue Has Her Say

Men are always doing it—conceiving
An ideal and foisting it
Onto some poor woman or other
Who gets stuck bearing the burden.
As Bartholdi conceived and executed me.
It takes a certain denial of sexual
Function to call a woman *Liberty*,
Tied to our bodies as we are, month
After month, cycle after cycle.
So Bartholdi suppressed, under all
These robes, that reality. No waist;
You'd hardly know I had breasts.
The only skin is my right arm,
Which I like, long firm line
From the wrist sliding
Past my elbow. Inside,
I am hollow, gouged out,
Opened to receive hundreds,
Like ants, who steal their way
Up my skirts, circle my empty core.
The place where my sex should be
Is filled with them, hot and impatient
Or silly and congenial. I suffer
For them daily, especially those
Leaking urine, vomit, or blood
Unprepared, surprised into illness
by the vertical, circular climb.
This stink and crowd are what I get—
The very best I can conceive—
Despite the good intentions of Bartholdi.
And so the years pass.
My back and legs ache
And the book, suggesting more

Than it will ever give, weighs
A ton. I want to put it down,
Tell my visitors I know how
Their lives go. I never will.
I am huge, copper-weighted,
Supporting the status of icon.
My positive, rigid construction means
I hold up the damn torch, year
After year, blood always draining
From my arm, hand and wrist
Always going numb.

The Real Thing

Strawberry Days, summer festival,
though the strawberries weren't local
and the carnival spilt from trucks.
City of Fun, booth after booth, houses of oily
dogs and men, thin, with tattoos
that purpled their chests
in hope. I remember
this dreamboat who winked
me to his stall with some talk
about my eyes (my eleven-year-old
body knobby as a stick).
But he gave me a chance:
for only a quarter, two hundred lines
attached to two hundred prizes,
maybe a Tootsie Roll, maybe a stuffed
dog. So I yanked a string
from the bunch, and a yellow-haired
blue-eyed sailor rose from a shelf,
kewpie traveller a foot high, luck
and love entering my life.
Another quarter: The Giant Rocket.
I thought I would go upside down
and cried *Daddy, Daddy, take me home*
till the operator—knight of the
machine, meant to be my boyfriend—
threw off the restraining bar,
knelt at my side.
Later the painted sailor
shattered, chalky plaster inside,
but I glued the head, piece by brittle
piece, reattached it to the body—
my own romance, lasting and real
as someone's dime chinking in
the Win-A-Glass crystal cup.

Fighting with My Mother

My mother, riding
next to me as I drive,
watches at stop signs.
She's looking right
for dangers
that might have an impact
on our relative positions
in the car.
Trying to avoid
accidents, she says,
"Clear right."
Looking left, I ask
myself shall I trust
our lives to her
judgment? or
turn to see
for myself?
"Still clear. Clear right."
However long
I hold my eyes
left, or straight,
I finally turn my stiff
neck to see
what she says isn't
coming. But
sometimes it is.

Telephoning China

is an act of faith: trust enough numbers
and the mechanism they are punched into; believe
electronics can join midnight here, tomorrow
afternoon there, continents and generations.

Whatever it is that happens
takes time, desire leading along the line.
My will to speak strings out in the thinnest
path, wavers into space, intercepted

just before the universe and bounced back.
I can hear this happen, and ghost voices
fluttering around my place in earth's sound.
Sometimes I give in to them,

let the moment go, recognize the precedence
of echoes. But I try again, till my impulse
becomes a tone on the far side of the globe.
I imagine a kind answer, a voice for my need.

"Wei," an operator says, the harshness,
I hope, gentled in translation.
I have come too far
along this vast span of language to quit now.

Favor, I remind myself, is for the fluent,
fluency, a quality of pitch and vibration.
I offer three Chinese numbers,
lio, lio, ling. Magically, they suffice

to make the last connection: my parents
are there, hear me, almost, take what I say
as real—words soothing, ephemeral, and my voice
a thin, wavering arc over the world.

Death of a Guppy

It was all,
all of it,
edible,
suspended
before my
round fish mouth,
open and
opening,
taking in
all of the
floating food.

I ate it,
ingested
it, inhaled
it, absorbed
all the food
through my mouth,
my round fish
mouth for food
and for gorg-
ing, gorging
on floating
fat morsels.

I ate, not
in hunger
but because
all the food,
untasted,
was there at
my round mouth

that opened
and opened
to let it
all enter.

Now bloated
and heavy,
I lie on
my side and
I flounder
out, bulging,
weak in the
weight of all
edible,
burdening,
oppressive
food I have,
yes, eaten.

To a Recreational Parachutist

The Lord upholdeth all that fall.

— PSALMS 145:14

1.

Humans imagined flight
by watching birds,
but we have seen
ourselves fall,
from trees, mountains,
grace.

In one mortal winter
twenty feet of snow
will seal a crevasse
till spring erodes
the underside
of the snowpack;
a climber learns
the treachery the instant
he breaks through.
Thus, in a lifetime
many who don't understand
shall fall.

2.

Like the boy, eighteen,
who jumped where you jump,
with Cedar Valley Freefall.
Both his chutes opened,
the main tangling
the reserve,
so he spiralled too quickly
but not fatally
down, till
he released the main,
and it, in dropping
away, collapsed
the reserve,
leaving him
five seconds,
four hundred feet.

Had he lived,
his instructor
could have said,
“This is what
you did wrong.”

3.

I can only imagine
you up there
in that light,
flimsy craft
that is mostly noise,
caught in the whole
human yearning
towards what may kill us.

When they open
the door, you refuse
to be shattered
by wind, already
knowing the errors
you can't make.
I see you climb
through the gap
into full mortal risk,
brace against the wing,
lower yourself to hang
from the wheel struts.

In that moment
you drop
through sting and thrust

to boundless, complete release.
Silence and time.
And what you have to do.
And the great bloom
of the earth, rising.

To My Brother in His Casket

Across the vast distance of the funeral
You are as luminous as the moon,
As graphic. I see on your face
How you rose over the hill, full
Of your future, into the path of the diesel.
You have been too clear, too insistent
To drop off now. You flew home
Across the night sky, new-scarred
Face, hands, silver
Twisted in your ring, the stone gone.
What if I were to touch you?

In Washington, in the Air and Space
Museum, is a small, darkening
Moon rock. Despite the blasted,
Broken quadrant where they found it,
A clean trajectory, cold relentless path
Brought it to my hand. Yet
My own fingers on that harsh, familiar
Surface didn't teach me
Why it had to come here, how it mattered,
Nor what it was that I had hoped to know.

Mary Keeps All These Things

I stir the innkeeper's sympathy
only when my water breaks and runs
down my leg, soaking my blue
robe, and I have to lean
against his shabby door;
he looks at me through splintered eyes.

I have come down from the donkey
in the great bell of my body,
the weight of the child and him kicking
inside, so the next guardian of those gates
that open only to money, much
more money than Joseph can pay,

will have to see me, my travail.
My accident is not a cheat but the urgency
of birth, and I am not ashamed. He considers,
refusing my eyes. Beard stained with mutton
grease, he finally says, "Stables. In the back,"
and jerks his head to shunt us to one side.

The cave of the animals is dark
and warm, smelling of straw, urine,
dung. Our rushes give off
only a smoky light. As we walk
between the pens, our donkey follows
under his pack, then another brays;

disturbed, the sheep baa.
Joseph worries for me as he cleans
a stall, spreads fresh straw
and a blanket where I can lie.
I am big and awkward as a camel sinking
down. What relief, to give myself

to pain, guessing the hours these knots
will come and go. Between them
I feel straw prickling my hair
and ears, scratching the back of my neck.
Then my body clenches, legs
and back and belly tight.

Each cramp I feel the pain can grow
no more, O Lord, no more. And yet
I have given my word and will
to bring this child. My body
opens and opens its passage between
my womb's constraint and the chaotic

clash of life. I will, in my extremity,
remember I have a name. Mary is
my name. I will split open, part
the shadow that keeps this child
from light. He must come, is coming,
comes. At last, his brash infant cry.

I watch Joseph clean him, bring him
to my arms. I am seized
by his perfection—tiny hands, clear
unblinking eyes. This dove, this calf,
this young and wondrous lamb squeals
as I take him to my breast.

Tiny gums grip my nipple; he sucks
and sucks, butting me with his insistent
head. When the liquid comes
into his hungry mouth, we are joined
in ache and pleasure—circle and dance;
I give him comfort and he gives it back.

Our small animal noises belong here
in the shelter of the poor and dumb
who break their bodies to sustain
life. I have saved clean wool
from the underbellies of the lambs,
carded it, and spun the softest

cloth to keep him warm. Tonight
he will sleep above us, in a manger
of sweet hay, and we will lie down,
our faces low upon the ground, hands
joined, sheltered in the shadow
of this small and brilliant life.

IV. The swimming place of knowledge

The Woman Whose Brooch I Stole

She hadn't hoped to be lifted after passing,
Slip in gaudy moments from her grave.

A niece and nephew came to tamp her down,
Stuff the dumpster with layers of her life.

But the jewelry was there, beneath the plastic
And lace existence they threw out and I found,

Rummaging back to the time
Her name was Mabel and she liked to bowl,

Crocheted doilies covered frayed arms
Of her overstuffed chairs, and she accepted gifts

She'd never use—stationery and boxed soap.
I didn't take it all, just earrings—

Cat's-eye green, the silver with blue stones,
And a pair to match the brooch.

When I wear it, I see her,
Fierce behind her pin,

Coming through in pink glitter and gold.

The Girl with the Mandolin

When you see the painting, she comes
Out to you and you wonder
If Picasso worked with models and who
She might have been, the girl
With the mandolin, present and whole.

If she were her body at its changing,
Fleshy shoulders under a light shawl
After her disrobing, she would embrace
The mandolin, its smooth surface,
Feel the strings imprinted on her hands.

When she posed for him, she wouldn't
See her breasts twist away from her body
Until of one, only the nipple remains
Behind the mandolin that is itself,
Scarcely altered, even singing, though

Music is another medium.
She would be the child of the soft voice
Who knew the taste of oranges,
The bitter skin of plums,
Too young to refuse or give permission.

Freak Accident Claims Rhino

The female rhino and her mate were
playing in the open pen at the zoo when
the female fell and caught her nose
under a rock ledge and suffocated.

She blundered to her death, like a woman
running into her husband and his lover
in a dusky restaurant downtown.

“David,” the woman says, “I thought
you were going to Boulder.” She stumbles
to their table and the truth,
and the air escapes her
so that she has to fall.

The rhino’s name was Minette.

In her brute innocence she came out
to lumber around in the sun.

But her bulk and her tiny brain
behind the one horn and pig eyes
couldn’t grasp the possibilities—
the crack, the ledge,
if it is there, is hidden
and is always a surprise.

She bumped against her mate;
she stumbled about. Ignorant,
she made the stupid mistake
and rock closed over her,
wedging her down. Extremity
claimed her: how knowledge comes
to the body—heave and throe,
heave and throe.

Night Jogging in the City

No stars, but there is weather
To convince me of the mortal limits
Of these streets, stretched like underground cable
That gives us the capacity to talk.
Passage through the night is a thrust into absence,
The pull of emptiness ahead, the risk
I'll throw myself at darkness once
Too often, and finally it will catch.
My body never knows what will take it, butcher
Shop doorway between barred windows,
Gaping driveway of the vacant garage,
Or the stretch of blocks becoming time.
Or maybe the dream of the old man
Lying in his bathtub after the fall
Behind the third floor frosted glass,
And no one to see the universe
Slipping through his eyes.
Out here, it is all image, and I am
Neither privileged nor blessed:
I promise myself I won't do this any more.
Still the pavement is the swimming place
Of knowledge, dark or lighted, each window
Somebody's womb against time.

Insomniac

The serial killer
Of my dreams,
Just before I awaken,

Is trying to get in
The apartment door.
Now I am not sleeping

And he is still here—
Vile, unwashed,
Staggered by his need.

I know what to do:
Make him drunk and stoned,
Walk him to the staircase,

Send him down into dark
Echoes, where he will be confused
By shapes and repetitions,

Till he is lost in the labyrinth
Of streets and will never,
I tell myself,

Find his way back.
But now I am awake and he
Might murder someone else

Because I have refused him,
Sent him off—my terror,
My nightmare.

Then the fog helps,
Finest tapping, sweet breath
Through the cracked window.

I will cover him in fog,
Which muffles all violence
As gauze protects a wound.

Three fog horns,
Each deeper than the last,
Bellow my deception,

futile, I know.
He waits still,
Somewhere in the night,

Depending on my pity,
My regret. I feel the kiss,
The whisper as he calls me

To his heart, of what
I'll have to offer him
To live out my life.

On Losing My Camera Below Dead Horse Point

I would really like to know
Who I am and just where, exactly,
I might belong. Sometimes I touch
My face, look severely at the image,
But then in the convenience store
I can't pick myself out
On the tv surveillance screen
From others waiting in line,
Gray forms, all vaguely familiar.

And that's where
The photographs come in, why
I've filled my albums. Once I caught
Lightning over a stone arch —
Only slightly fuzzy —
Which surely tells me something.
And I stood in a frame
With a deer, not frightened, not
Running away. I remember the ledge
Below Dead Horse Point, the last shot,
Wrapping my Pentax with its own strap
And placing it square on a rock.

What did I know?
In such vast circumstances
I could only take in so much.
Twenty minutes later in the jeep,
I learned you can go back,
But what you wanted may be gone.
I'll have to find another way
To remember what I've lost.
Not being able to focus,
How will I tell what I can't
Hope for, what I already love?

Mountain Psalm

We didn't come here to pray
But snow and a brittle skim of ice
Suggest otherwise. And to climb
Is a form of worship: we accept
Someone else's version of the way up;
We trust and follow.

Of course questions, doubts: Why so slight
An incline? all the doubling back
When we might rise? Is a trail
Best for some best for us?
How to reconcile crystal-laden air
With the consequence of sight?

We walk under pines, stiff as elders,
Imposing answers all along our way.
From beneath, they are a density
Allowing only now and then
Dusts of brilliance, surprises of light.
But the more we climb, the smaller
They become, an aspect, a deeper green.

And then, the nature of treachery
Or the treachery of nature. Considering
Flaming peaks are tricks of light on ice,
The way up is also the way down,
And we don't transcend but climb,
For what, then, should we pray? Balance,
And the snowy grip of each footfall?

And sun, source of energy and vision,
Metaphor for whom we seek and how.
Father, Mother, give us distance
Through which to see our lives.
Passage to this lookout and a blessing
To perceive the extent and limits of our sight.

From this height, air streams down
To the valley floor, refreshing
The city as it struggles through its haze.
But the city of our dwelling has become
Its own reward, streets locked,
All of the angles right. How rarely
We prevail, vision cleared, above,
Eating apples, bread, and cheese
In the clean moment, on the legitimate rock.

Why I Am a Witch

Because each October the maple in the field
Takes fire and I stand to watch it burn.
Because sun strikes the far slope
Until the aspens rise, smoky gold.
Because of the edge of the crag.
Because stars hide themselves in the sharp blue,
Waiting. Because I can name things and know
They will change. Because the light
Won't always be there and because
Nothing should hurt that much.

Mantis

Leaf and stick, stick-brown
On a brick above the planter
Full of flowers and simpler insects,
The mantis affects an attitude of prayer.
“Oh, Lord,” it seems to say, “I thank thee
I am praying, and not prey.”
Revelation is a lightning-fast
Strike at a cricket, helpless, clasped
In folded forelimbs. This is true worship,
Prey seized, held high, reverence of reward.
Triangular jaws join on the cricket’s head.
Small bites. At some point the cricket becomes dead.
No hypocrite, the mantis prays all meal long,
Helpless, obedient to what the god says.
It is thankful. Who would doubt its sincerity?
Five inches long, every day growing.

Sophia Whispers

"I *am* understanding; I have strength."

— PROVERBS 8:14

Just before dawn you lie on a cot
On a screened porch overlooking a lake,
On the lip of consciousness, considering
The efficacy of sleep. Hot and sweaty,
Your legs tangled among sheets,
You dream yourself bound and feel
Breasts and ovaries the handicaps that hold you.
But so much of the world floats.
What you scarcely know are fingerlets
Of mist that pat the waves, the gliding
Back of a water turtle, a mourning
Dove's haunting call. From the blankness
Of night through the generation of shapes,
Spaces we call day, the essential emerges:
Feeding to produce form.
And the holy circle, life-bearing lake,
Great silver bowl to wash you.
When you walk into the cold shock, water
Chilling your feet, belly, breasts,
Give in to the intake of breath.
You have to go under to learn your body
Glides. Your contours will find the lake's
Pockets of warmth, where you will inevitably
Rise. You can sustain yourself, your firmness
In this tension between wave and sky, this balanced
Surface that always proceeds from depth.

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The Greensboro Review: "The Stolen Television Set"
High Ground Press: "Tiger Eating a European"
Kansas Quarterly: "Why I Am a Witch," "Summer Days, a Painting by Georgia O'Keeffe"
The Literary Review: "To My Brother in His Casket"
The New Yorker: "Nor Am I Who I Was Then"
Prairie Schooner: "Sophia Whispers," "Lessons of Erosion"
River Styx: "Telephoning China"
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Utah Holiday: "*The Girl with the Mandolin*"
Weber Studies: "*Liberty Enlightening the World: The Statue Has Her Say*," "On Losing My Camera Below Dead Horse Point," "To a Recreational Parachutist," "Insomniac"
Women of Wisdom and Knowledge (Eds. Marie Cornwall and Susan Howe. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990): "Freak Accident Claims Rhino," "Death of a Guppy"

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I WOULD LIKE to thank a number of people for their help in the development of my poetry and the preparation of this manuscript. My parents and brothers and sisters have always been my biggest supporters. George Bilgere was the first person to take me seriously as a poet. I learned from several fine poets who are also fine teachers: Dave Smith, Bin Ramke, Donald Revell, and Mark Jarman. Members of my writing group have contributed enormously to the development of most of these poems; my thanks to Dennis Clark, Laura Hamblin, Scott Hatch, Lance Larsen, MaryJan Munger, Julie Nichols, Dave Paxman, and Stephen Taylor for their critiques. Peter Makuck, Terri Witek, and Emma Lou Thayne have provided encouragement and friendship and their own fine poems as models of what poetry can be and do. Sue Booth-Forbes spent long hours helping me construct and edit this manuscript. Thanks to Ed Geary for his wonderful introduction and to Bruce Patrick and Jonathan Saltzman for their book design. And Bert Wilson has been a generous and supportive mentor, both as chair of the English Department at Brigham Young University and as director of the Charles Redd Center. Finally, my thanks to the Redd Center for making possible the publication of this collection.

■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Elizabeth Howe completed her Ph.D. in English and creative writing at the University of Denver. (She made up the middle name to distinguish herself from Susan Howe, the language poet.) Over the years she has studied with Dave Smith, Bin Ramke, Donald Revell, Mark Jarman, and Carolyn Kizer. Her poems have appeared in The New Yorker, Southwest Review, Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, and other journals, and she has worked as the editor of Exponent II, the managing editor of The Denver Quarterly, and the poetry editor of Dialogue. She describes herself as a Mormon feminist who is enthusiastic about Diet Pepsi, the landscape of Southern Utah, and the Sundance Film Festival. She currently lives in Utah Valley with her dog Griffin.

■ A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This book was set in Electra, an original typeface designed for the Mergenthaler Linotype Company in 1935 by William Addison Dwiggins (1880–1956). A noted American artist, illustrator, and calligrapher, Dwiggins produced many finely conceived and executed trade books for publisher Alfred A. Knopf. Dwiggins' fresh approach to title pages in particular was much celebrated. He was perhaps more responsible than any other designer for the marked improvement in book design in the 1920s and 1930s.

Not merely content with designing books, Dwiggins also produced many typefaces for Linotype, including Metro (1929) and Caledonia (1938). In approaching Electra, Dwiggins drew from his extensive background in commercial art to produce an original typeface suitable for both book and advertising composition. Although classified as a "modern" typeface, Electra was not based on any particular model, thereby managing to avoid the extreme thick–thin contrast that plagues most modern faces. Its clean sparseness, compact fit, and inherent charm and individuality reflect well the controlled spontaneity evident in all of Dwiggins' work.

TYPOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN SALTZMAN



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