



# Magnolia

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MICHAEL HETTICH

## The Winds

And so they collected those skittish winds that blow between darkness and first light. They lassoed whatever allowed the wind to move, and they tied it with a slipknot, and the wind stood there waiting like a tree or a bale of hay, and it didn't even try to struggle; it just stood there as other winds

began to grow restless, winds that usually slept until daylight, winds that slip down before rain, winds we call Son-and-Daughter, Memory, and send off to school like some failure of imagination to see how they will do there, who else they might become. And when they'd collected enough wind for everyone, after many mornings of austerity and work, they dug holes to plant the wind—or tried to—in the fields where their ancestors were buried, and some of those winds understood what was required and stood perfectly still



photo by  
James Aubright

until they were the farmland and orchards that make this region so fertile. But the others, their brothers and sisters, were not so docile: After all, they whispered, these people had trapped them and tied them in bundles without the least concern for their pride or imagination, or for their fragile bones—  
and so they decided to seem human for a while until they could blow things apart from within, and they started to move like nothing with a vengeance, driving cars and building houses. On, and on, and on.

## This Time

I can't remember any animals to mean what I need to say. I can't find any birds. And I can't think of the best trees to think through, either, except maybe live oaks, since they grow here without anyone planting them. I can't imagine bodies of water, or of clouds. I can't find what I mean in furniture or books, windows, lamps or mirrors. My body says nothing, and neither does yours, my love. My face is just bones. And although your face is still beautiful, like a language that's complete in itself, it's not enough either to say what I need to. So the bees will have to suffice, the honey bees which have been vanishing so suddenly, the honey bees whose buzzing is a species of silence, the silence of trying to think in a crowd, or of trying to think in a crowd of animals and trees whose names we don't know and meet for our whole life as strangers.

## The Precious Stones

The breeze has braided the grasses like hair and now it's unraveling the seeds into the woods by the creek, where they'll lie until something eats them or they start to grow. The grasses, at least some of them, will stay braided through the winter. They'll lie braided under snow.

No one will remember them, but we will know they're there because we were silent, looking out across that field. Because we watched a coyote, head low, stalking black birds, crows or ravens. For years, I lived alone in basements without windows. I can hardly tell the truth about basements like that, without thinking of snow

or remembering sleeping for days in perfect darkness when a blizzard buried everything, cutting out the lights and alarm clock. And the dark would never have surrendered down there. It would have curled up within its own weight the way people are sometimes changed into precious stones and thus considered valuable, and polished to a gleam that sparks up when the light shines upon them.

## Even Sleeping

I hug my love's body in the warm night in sleep and we sweat together, while outside some bird calls out like singing. We hear it, even sleeping, and it changes the shape of our dreams. We both believe in animals no one has named. Standing in a slow-moving elevator up a stranger tells me he was swimming just beyond the waves and sand bars when a huge fish or even a whale swam by, its body brushing his legs. Then we step off together and go our separate ways. And many years ago, when my children were small, a mockingbird flew into the elevator I was riding in alone. It flew against the wall, stunned itself, and fell to the floor, so I cupped it in my hands and walked from office to office asking for a window that would open so I could put it on the sill there until it came to and could fly. But those windows don't open, so I finally carried it outside and set it gently down in the root-crotch of a tree and went back to work. I love the way those birds sing in other birds' voices and even with the cries of barking and our human sounds. The truest love is every day, we understand that now, even sleeping.

from a collection called *The Animals II*

## The Rain

But there are yellow birds singing in the oak trees, and there are birds flying above us, always, which need to be watched. And the landscapes inside us, beyond ourselves, are like the lives we have forgotten

and full of creatures we have never seen, who talk when  
we do  
and dream we are doing what we're doing right now.  
Just last night I imagined I was lying in my garden  
on top of the grass--floating there--while it rained  
hard enough to blur my eyes. All around my body  
mushrooms were pushing up. I imagined they were  
groaning,  
and I hoped someone would come along to gather them  
and find me.  
I realized my wife was sleeping in the house  
beside the other sleeping me, so I let myself just melt  
away  
into the ground--the way people I've loved  
have simply melted, right before my eyes--  
and I wondered as I lay there what it would feel like  
to move underground, like the water.

## The Musician



painting by  
Michele Wirt

The man in our basement practices guitar  
all day while his family is off to work and school.  
I listen to him running his complicated scales,  
practicing dissonance, chord changes, nuanced  
voicings. Sometimes he sings, when he thinks  
I'm not home, in a high-pitched yowl  
that scares me, to be honest, since the desperation  
quivering behind that sound reminds me  
of everything I haven't done yet and probably  
never will now; it reminds me of my hair  
and skin, of my eyes and desires.  
So I get up and walk around loudly until he hears me  
and takes a break. We meet outside  
to circle the block a few times, talking  
of Bach and Bud Powell, dreams and Ravi Shankar--  
and soon we are singing to each other, my friend  
and I, and before long our families have returned  
from wherever they'd gone off to, our children and  
wives,  
brimming with news of their days, asking us  
how our work went. I can hear my friend  
in the basement now, talking about the cases he tried,  
the judges he faced. So by the time  
I pick up my guitar to demonstrate the ideas  
I worked on today, my wife has started crying,  
dinner has been burned, the children are crabby,  
and my fingers feel heavy with silence.

# The Bull Frogs

This is how clueless we were when we first moved here from Vermont and couldn't shake the cold for an entire year: so clueless that every time we went into the Everglades, every time we waded off the road there we just had to take off our clothes for a swim in the black water, rejoicing at how far we'd traveled from Vermont to this warmth, and we'd delight in what we called the bullfrogs as we swam out, their croaks, so resonant in the quiet Everglades, and we reveled at the sweet smells and balmy breezes as we floated on our backs to watch the buzzards circle and marveled at the fact that so few people came out here to swim: The water smelled like flowers. We had no idea that those croaks we found so charming were challenges from bull alligators establishing their territory, calling anything in the immediate vicinity to make love or fight, and they were hungry too. We just swam out, naked, happy to be alive. And then we got dressed and drove home through the dusk along a two-lane highway that was littered with the bodies of wild creatures hit by cars: vultures and opossums, turtles, snakes, raccoons. We hardly talked as we drove: Sometimes you looked out the window at the darkness. More often you fell asleep beside me.

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