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Tomasko, Jeanie

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# Tricks of Light

JEANIE TOMASKO

parallel press **poetry series**





A Parallel Press Chapbook



# Tricks of Light

Poetry by  
Jeanie Tomasko

**Parallel Press**

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

Parallel Press  
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries  
728 State Street  
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“Loving Light This Much” in *Avocet*; “Almost November” in *Fox Cry Review*; “Listening to Cranes” and “Angela, Reading a Poem” in *Free Verse*; “Plate 279 Wood Thrush” and “Plate 11 Ring-billed Gull” in *Lilliput Review*; “Plate 409 Common Loon,” “Agony of the Leaves,” and “Plate 354 Swainson’s Hawk” in *Oak Bend Review*; “Edge of September” in *Secondwind*; “Plate 249 Red Shouldered Hawk” in *The LBJ: Avian Life Literary Arts*; “The End of Dawn,” “Like This,” and “little lives” in *The Midwest Quarterly*; “Butterfly at the Intersection” in *Verse Wisconsin*; “Weekend Work” and “Sweetness” in *Wisconsin Poets’ Calendar*; and “Watching Bees” in *Hospital Drive*.

WFOP First Place Muse Prize: “Plate 153 Swainson’s Warbler” (also titled: “Until You Knew”).

The poems with “Plate” titles are from the author’s ekphrastic series, based on the prints in Audubon’s *Birds of America*.

*Cover illustration by Barry Roal Carlsen*

For my children  
Katie, Patrick, Lizzi, Chris

*Believe in your dreams, dear ones*





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## **At first, after hearing**

I wanted to fly  
or drive fast, I wanted  
to make love—  
something, anything—  
wild and unkempt.

It was dusk, and raining.

I stared at the crane  
standing alone,  
the goose adjusting  
her feathers  
over an untidy nest. Strange

how after news of death  
you love cold wind,  
wet streets, small birds  
singing at night—  
your eyes tear up  
at a stir in the reeds,  
the damp back of a muskrat  
swimming home.

## Secrets Spilled

Pretend your ear bones are tiny wind chimes  
hung on a thin branch waiting  
for a small silver breeze.  
Evening is when the thrushes say

*You can't hold on to sadness.*

Today the rain took  
all the bright dresses of the poppies,  
scattered them on the grass.  
Soon the sun  
will have his longest day.  
Come August the goldfinches  
will empty all the faces of the sunflowers,  
and they will do it while they sing

*You can't hold on to anything.*

## little lives

late August mornings  
bees sleep in on the sunflowers  
until their bodies are warm

and ready to move  
every day it takes  
a little longer

my husband says come  
touch them they have their own  
small way of breathing

yesterday we watched  
a caterpillar on a stem it had  
a smooth copper head glinting eyes

all around in the stillness yellow  
grasshoppers vaulted through the air  
you could hear them land

on brittle brown leaves  
you could almost hear the spiders  
spinning spinning

the world itself  
forgiving our trespass

## Listening For Cranes

It was late March when you took  
me to the marsh to listen

for cranes. We walked  
the narrow trail, all the way

to the north side, to the old pier.  
I remember your jeans and

the muddy trickles of snowmelt  
we had to navigate in the woods.

I wanted to touch your hair.

Suddenly, overhead  
they were calling and calling,

resonant and unrestrained  
like water rushing in spring,

desire, loosed.

All afternoon we lay on those

weathered boards, watched  
their wings rearrange the air.

## **Plate 41 Sandhill Crane**

You're drawn to the soft lines,  
the awkward angularity,

the ruber rising in the neck  
then the patch of fire;

a thousand cold mountains  
release a river of melt.

It's then your rib bones recognize  
the manner of this flame.



## The Problem with Morning

I wish the cardinal would stop  
telling the truth about morning,

for I want to linger,  
tell you things about light

he will never know:

how it lessens the surprise  
of your hair on my skin

how it forces the brain  
to work instead of hands—

how he will never understand

I don't want light  
to keep showing me everything.

## Weekend Work

First light, and already the clover  
bends and rises to the small weight

of bees, snatching nectar.  
The white faces of lace

allow the sweet nuzzle of want,  
then let go. There is so much to do

the wrens say, gathering sticks,  
the oaks say, widening. So much

work I say, letting morning  
ripen blackberries till they shine.

## Not in the Field Guide

Wildflowers open  
like gates to gardens,

like bells—tiny  
Buddhist bells  
ringing the world awake—

like monks rising to pray,  
hearts aroused by song.

## Sweetness

God gave the honeybee six weeks  
and so  
she flies  
five hundred miles  
in short refrains  
of alleluias  
to windy, white clover fields  
to pink and proper rose gardens  
gathering nectar in that careful needle  
taking no time for self-pity, though  
her life's work, together  
with that of eleven sisters  
was the teaspoon of honey  
I just stirred into my tea.

Sometimes she stops to walk  
on my sunflowers,  
her sturdy legs grow heavy  
as she fills her pollen-baskets  
with food for the bees back home,  
but I like to think her stroll  
on those upturned yellow faces  
is more for the joy of making me wonder  
what I know of happiness.

## The End of Dawn

A slant of pink is cradled just below  
Your collarbone. It rises slightly when  
You breathe, then falls. I kiss this light. I know  
It is not mine to keep, but morning's been

That way, so full of dreams. There was a time  
I would have died for wings, but now to watch  
You sleep is heaven. I do not want to fly.  
The birds outside begin to talk of such

Ideas. Let them have their songs, their flight.  
All night it stormed and I awoke to say  
My prayers to gods of old—Desire and Light;  
That they might change the world so I could stay.

The end of dawn and songs of birds and pain  
Are more acute the morning after rain.

## Loving Light This Much

All day in the woods up north  
you can hear a faint tinkling  
like woodwinds  
or a small set of bells.

It begins in the palest of light  
when the nudge from sleep  
comes from quiet things,  
beckons you out the door,  
down the path,  
singing songs you used to know.

This bird can open locked love.

I have seen him only once,  
on a low branch of a tall pine,  
making music in his dappled throat  
with tiny glass bells  
and small flutes.

I watched him sing all through dusk  
and when the shadows were long  
he flew off with all of his secrets  
but one, which it seemed  
I should tell.

## Night Skies

Summers my father  
walked with us  
through woods  
to the beach  
where we lay on stones  
under moonless skies.  
He pointed out the Milky Way,  
Scorpio's tail, the Scales,  
explained light years,  
black holes and showed  
us how to trace  
imaginary lines  
from the Big Dipper  
to the North Star.

*And if you can find the North Star,  
you'll always know your way,*  
he said, not thinking of the southern sky—

the disorientation  
when there is nothing  
to hold on to—  
or the clear summer nights  
when I will show my own children  
how to trace imaginary lines  
and my voice  
will startle me.

## Butterfly at the Intersection

I almost stopped the midday traffic  
at 51<sup>st</sup> and Washington, almost

thought it was my work  
to cross you to safety, almost

said, yes, I must do this,  
for you remind me of someone

the way you ride the wind  
eddies, dipping and leaping,

the way you check your face  
in a thousand windows, the way

you flip your orange shoulders  
at the world, believe it cares.

I would tell you of a field  
of flowers, I would whisper

the way,  
but you fly off

and my words hover just above  
all this flash and shine.



## Agony of the Leaves

After the brain tumor  
was almost completely  
removed, she sent  
letters to relatives  
asking for paper, paint and tea.  
She put away her microscopes  
and scientific work,

folded cranes—  
white and blue, light  
as flight.

Nights she brewed  
Drops of Jade,  
watched the leaves unfurl,  
contort, contend  
with fate.  
She painted mountains  
with travelers in bamboo  
hats, moons setting  
beyond rivers, fishermen  
standing alone in boats  
far from shore  
five white birds flying north  
into mist.

## Edge of September

Again this year it comes:  
the shift in the wind  
that certain slant of sun  
the sudden red of sumac.

Out at the lake  
birdsong is less urgent,  
the young can feed themselves.  
In a few days  
something like light  
will tug on wings.

I am at home with  
the downside of summer.  
I take stock of the woodpile.  
Night comes earlier. The space  
between cricket chirps, longer.  
I've stopped coloring my hair.

My husband fingers the gray  
as if learning a tenderness.

## Plate 249 Red Shouldered Hawk

She speaks. He shifts  
his weight, cocks his head.

His shoulders lift and he  
returns her common sounds

with common sounds  
the way, after years,

small attentions  
like the finishing

of the other's sentence,  
become a peculiar language

and the air around, redolent  
with the old familiar.

## Tricks of Light

1.

Even my uncorrected eye  
can see the sunrise  
on Venus between the bare  
November limbs—  
it is barely a suggestion  
of light,  
a blur, the way  
a star might look  
from a deep part of the sea,  
the way you might suddenly know  
something is true.

2.

In winter the earth  
is close to the sun,  
but tilted and cold  
like fear.

Why is it so hard  
to say a word  
the body  
has always known?

3.

Yesterday the children made a hundred snow angels. Today  
robins splash in wing-melt.  
Puddles are the desire and mess of birds  
and boys. Now I cross the street  
to avoid them.

Somewhere there's a picture of my sister, snapped  
as she ran along a Cape Cod beach, her face  
perfectly reflected in a puddle left by the  
high tide.

4.

Once for a whole June morning  
I watched dragonfly nymphs  
crawl from their muddy wombs  
to logs  
where they sat, split open  
and filled  
with summer's light air.

There is a German word  
that means longing  
for a place never been to.

5.

Everyday, doesn't something—

a child, a woman, the slanted afternoon sun—

look right at you?

6.

I mentioned not knowing that word

and my friend said,

*sehnsucht*,

it means nostalgia,

desire and longing,

a sort of homesickness

for a place never seen

never been to.

A chosen melancholy,

she added, because

the desire is unlikely

to be fulfilled.

7.

All fall I watch the leaves

trade their place with light.

There are days I cannot bear

the unburdened limbs,

the wide reach of sky,

this sudden love.

## Plate 279 Wood Thrush

At dusk  
the song  
like the secret  
name of God  
shivers  
down  
the branches,  
enters  
the bone  
in your chest  
at the place  
riven  
by a nameable  
sadness

and sets  
its seal.

## Walking in the woods after days of rain

my steps are tentative  
like prayers.

I have not been this way before.  
My feet must learn  
its mossy rocks, shifting  
stones, what is solid—  
or not.

Small rivers run everywhere  
like snowmelt.

If ever I were to kiss you,  
it would be here,  
in an afternoon's shaft  
of sun—light  
slanting through oaks,  
the dark woods, quickening.



## Carpe Diem

Sandhill cranes	ride	the wind
play on	the warm	currents
breezes	swirl	sing
you and I	consider	what this means

## Plate 345 Seaside Sparrow

*I know that hope is the hardest love we carry.*

–Jane Hirshfield

What you want is the saltwash  
of high tide, the breeze of the sea  
pushing against your primaries,  
words to one old prayer and bones  
this light.

What you want is a firm stand  
of hollow sea grass should you return.

What you want is to be sure  
of what to do on a day like this  
when the heart in your chest  
wants to be fire given a chance  
with wind.

## Plate 153 Swainson's Warbler

Bend your thumb to any finger—  
make a circle, the size of a small

spider's web. Once I saw a thousand  
strung across a field, morning sun

caught in them, dew glinting.  
Imagine, those thousand tiny spiders

spinning in the dark, before dawn.  
*To wait is to want more,*

I read. Some wait on painted  
ledges, or inside flowers, perfectly

motionless for days. Still,  
it's the same desire.

Like the bird's exact intention:  
*bone, wing, want,*

all these a fluid move toward,  
say, the thin branch of a flame

azalea, some small meat hiding  
in the flower's deep cup.

Once in spring, you and I  
lay on some sand shore;

I couldn't tell you about the singing  
in my hands, about how they wanted

to touch your face  
move the stray hair

behind your ear. What I knew  
of desire was only how to tell

which song was the warbler's  
and every time the small bird sang

I said there, that one—until you knew.

## Almost November

and you say you want to be  
somewhere else—a city

with energy, somewhere  
besides this grief of leaves.

Geese have been watching  
the sky too, wanting

to go anywhere  
the moon is going.

All month the trees have been shining  
with a certain kind of light.

There must be a needle in the heartwood  
that pulls them through this quilt of loss.

Almost November and I want to be  
nowhere else but here.

Here where the branches ache  
with the cold ebb of light

and the juncos  
fly in from the north

on winds  
dependable as breath.

## Plate 354 Swainson's Hawk

Unsolicited and deft,  
he comes  
like certain diagnosis—

a shadow that  
will rearrange  
everything

we know—  
and don't—  
about light.

## Watching Bees

Knowing you were tired of death  
we spoke of other things,  
traded stories  
about our fathers,  
dogs we used to have,  
your trip to Paris—how you  
bargained with the artist  
for the painting of the woman  
with your sister's eyes.  
We watched the afternoon light  
play on the table, the color  
of saffron, you said,  
and you wished  
for energy to dust the dust.

And now I'm watching bees  
on a Saturday morning, hovering  
around the fading violet  
hosta flowers—and you  
are back in the hospital.

We were like bees  
that day—skimming what was left  
of the late-summer air,  
entering small doorways,  
rummaging like thieves  
for any last sweetness.

## The last time I saw you

you showed me your garden and told me that finally, that year, you had color all year round. I asked about certain flowers and you knew their names, whether they liked sun or shade and how much water. The neighbor you told me about was across the fence, staring at your oxygen tank. We sat on the stone steps, you pulled weeds and told me your plans for spring. Your partner would be ripping out the kitchen and painting walls. You would be planting yarrow over in the corner by the lavender and Sweet William just along the edge of the bluebells. You joked about your partner's black thumb as you carefully cut some plantings, put them in Zip-Lock bags and told me what to do with them when I got home.

I want to tell you that through your gate last winter I could see the dogwood's red arms lightly shawled with snow, and just the other day the bed of yellow tulips gleaming in the sun. The hen and chicks you gave me have multiplied and are growing, even on stones. The green ground cover, which you told me the name of but I forgot, which was the size of a baggie that day, is growing wild in the front garden. Remember, I couldn't promise you I would keep it trimmed.



## **Plate 409 Common Loon**

By first ice you will be gone,  
and as if you knew

of the voiceless white winter  
you leave behind,

you carry it with you  
like a token, a longing,

and never speak of it  
until you return.

## Plate 324 Red-Winged Blackbird

The buds of the swamp maple open  
like newborns' fists, like tiny

roses, like the sudden bright wings  
of angels or the recognition

of love. It could happen  
on a day like today, sky

so blue, then like a flash of red  
on a blackbird's wing;

it could happen  
that fast.

## Like This

It might have been like this: a rampant swath  
of fire—or like a heron's rise, that blue  
and slow desire. The way a thought will sift  
through time. A flower's life: a language you  
have learned and left behind. Or this: a kiss.  
Whatever was, lives on somewhere. Sometimes  
her name will slip into my sleep—like this:  
the shiver of a bird before it flies,  
the faintest musk of plum leaves on the skin—  
and bring with it the only day I touched  
her hair. Like this: an angel's wing. But in  
what world was that? Too soon the heart adjusts  
like some dark bird who cannot trust the light  
whose wing-tucked song forever haunts the night.

## **Plate 11 Ring-billed Gull**

Whatever you heard  
on mid-summer's eve,  
don't tell—just show

where to point my heart  
when to turn my head  
and which soft wind

dear fellow, to follow.

## Angela, Reading a Poem

Watch the bee work the wild roses in June, how she sips from the deep cups  
with her slow straw, how she gathers pollen on her small, black legs,  
how she flies off, drunk on gold.

There is the slightest pause before water wraps around stone. You, too, must learn  
to bow. Watch the monks from Tibet tap colored sand to make the mandala.

The aim of the hummingbird is quick and precise.  
The trudge of the turtle, heavy with eggs, is also precise.

Have you seen a fly-fisherman sail his line back and forth, back and forth,  
then straight to the mouth of the shy brook trout?

Have you done, one thing in your life, this carefully?

The flute of the wood thrush is washed and clean. Listen.  
The poet, too, believes each word is a chance at passion.

## **Plate 251 Piping Plover**

What you need in the end  
is simple: the silent sea, a raveled  
strand, scrim of sky.

You will know the season  
when it comes,  
by its favor of a certain wind,

its manner with your small, hollow bones.

## Plate 326 Great Blue Heron

Sedge grass    breath    stillness    and then    a thousand wings

like fingers    a heron    breaks    the sky    stopping your heart

tracing    the air    like an arrow    shot through water    suddenly

your bones    this is    the way a lover speaks    like grace

like    the way    wind    says your name    —amen, amen, amen—







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Jeanie Tomasko is the author of *Sharp as Want* (Little Eagle Press), which is a poetry/artworks collaboration with Sharon Auberle. Her poems have appeared in many journals including *Lilliput Review*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *The Midwest Quarterly* and *Wisconsin People and Ideas*. Centennial Press has accepted her manuscript, *The Collect of the Day*, for publication.

Born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin, she earned her degree in nursing from UW–Madison and works as a home health nurse in the Madison area. She is an active member of the ecumenical Benedictine community at Holy Wisdom Monastery. She has four grown children. Jeanie and her husband, Steve, enjoy the outdoors and venture out whenever they can via foot, ski, or a couple of paddles and a seaworthy canoe.





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