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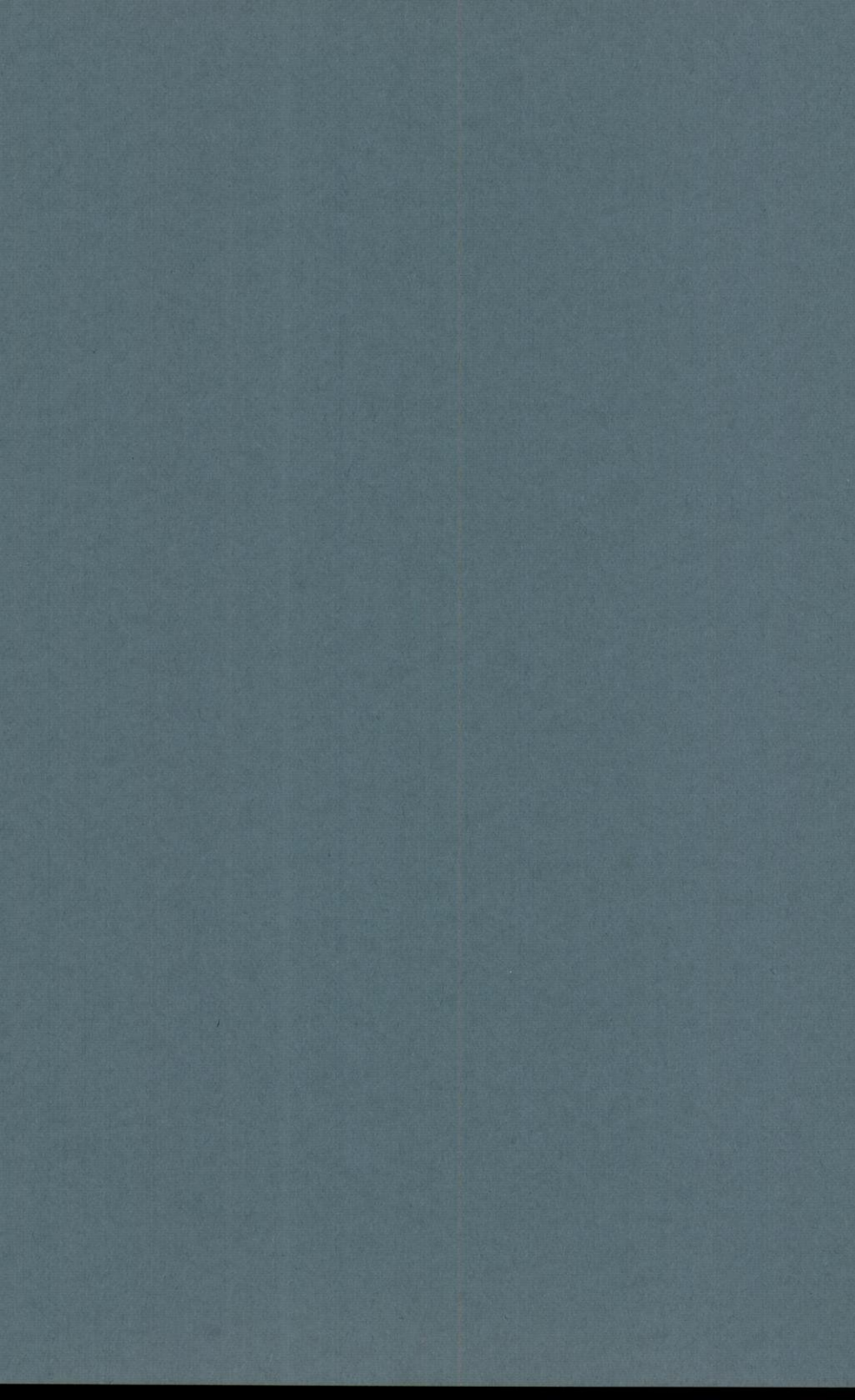
SURE KNOWLEDGE

POEMS BY ELIZABETH ONESS

ELIZABETH ONESS lives in La Crosse, Wisconsin with her husband, C. Mikal Oness, and their son, Jensen. She is coeditor of Soundpost Press and directs marketing and development for Sutton Hoo Press. Her poems have appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Shenandoah* and other magazines. Her stories have received numerous honors including an O. Henry Prize and a Nelson Algren Award. She is currently finishing her first novel *Twelve Rivers of the Body*.

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◀ *SURE KNOWLEDGE* ▶



ELIZABETH ONESS

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The Atlanta Review "The Cost"

The Connecticut Review "At the Church Hall Rummage Sale "

The Georgia Review "Belleek"

literary hot girls review "Late"

The Montserrat Review "The Silver Screen"

Poetry Ireland Review "Elegy"

Prairie Schooner "After Fighting, The Frail Harmonic"

Shenandoah "My Sister's Wedding"

The Watershed Anthology "Sestina After Daylight Savings"

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For Chad

➤ Belleek

I am troubled, I'm dissatisfied, I'm Irish.

— Marianne Moore

For years I resisted it, the only
shatterable part of my inheritance

china sprinkled with insipid shamrocks,
two tones of green, the sweetly clustered leaves

bordering the plates in an Irish ring-a-rosy,
unfurling from the teapot's stalk

like a fairy invention, a porcelain version of
a time that never was.

There was no blarney in the house where I grew up.
We were tight-lipped, silent;
superfluity was sin.

*Nothing to do? I'll give you something to do.
You want something to cry about? I'll give you something . . .*

My grandmother cried leaving Ireland the last time.
I sat beside her on the plane

staring down at the Cliffs of Moher,
water breaking over the wrack-mired stone.

She had shown me the house where she grew up,
the nettled fields, the barn

where her father locked her in a stall
and she stayed all night afraid
and no one let her out.

A vine of angry fathers, mothers porcelain pale.

When I left my father's house
I too knew it would be my final visit.

But I left without tears, shook the dust from my feet,
the only nostalgia a wordless music.

I was as guilty as anyone. I knew it.

Every time I opened my mouth there was drama,
accusation, but my words fell on whiskey

dissolved in that distillate warmth.

And still this problem with the china—
unadorned it would be lovely,

translucent weave of white on white,
the palest gloss of yellow

tipped inside the teapot's stem.
It's the sentiment that spoils it,

as if the unembellished can't be pleasing.
I want a teapot bearing

each denial of the body, bitterness and bad teeth.

But even the blemished past isn't
unembellished truth.

The darker truth
is what's confided. Her whisper

whispers through me now: *Come here little one. . . .*
Come here 'till I tell you.

➤ The Cost

The picture in the Children's Bible showed
the fullness of God's test: Abraham,
his upraised hand, knife poised against
a bilious sky. His sandals planted

in the dust—the human digging in
against what God requires. He stood
above his son in the neatly painted clearing,
boulders and stones pleasingly arranged,

while Isaac helpless on his back, diapered
like a baby, waited on a pyre of branches,
ready for the flames. The church hall
where we went each Sunday—

a Catholic school gymnasium
filled with folding chairs.
Behind the wooden altar, long curtains
over cinderblock painted a sullen green.

Babies wailed above the murmured mass
and their wordless protestation
confirmed what I believed—
that every Sunday after church

the priest would choose a child
to offer up to God.
A buried misapprehension
for more than thirty years,

but I remember the prickle of my woolen skirt,
fidgeting in my folding chair
and making my decision.
The camel through the needle's eye,

the narrow path, it seemed so clear:
there was god's way or mine.
And in my secret heart I knew
the path I would choose

would be my own pleasure,
my own sweet darkness.
I would believe in other stories
and there would be a cost.

➤ The Narrow Bed

First it was my mother's
then it was mine,
the mattress shaped
by our years of slender bodies.
Like a pencil resting
in a desktop groove,
there was only one way
to lie in it. One spring
I brought a young man home.
Guests were not allowed upstairs,
but after my parents left,
we climbed the steps,
past photos mounted
on the stairway wall —
daughters in white blouses,
shiny hair and polished shoes.
I watched his hands
unbuttoning my shirt the way
I'd watch him at a wheel
press his fingertips
into the spinning clay;
I felt the movement of his hands
was somehow making me.
He laughed at the bed,
how even for us, unused
to generous spaces,
its solitary width
was too solitary.
Downstairs in daylight
our bodies lit by sun,
the line of his shoulder
over me, my skin dark
against the white rug,
how small and perfect
I seemed to myself then.

My father shuffled through the house,
as if lifting a foot
would unbalance him,
the air itself untrustworthy,
thickened by the scent
of daughters becoming women.
For days he sat in a plastic lawn chair,
gazing over briars
and unmowed grass.
His face went slack,
he would not speak.
We must have seemed
like paper dolls become animate—
we chose black stockings
and bright clothes.
My father dreamed of demure
paper fashions, pressed the tabs
against our backs.
Twenty years before,
fishing in Vermont,
I dropped a sawdust lion
off our perch above the brook—
the bright orange toy
caught between the current and
a branch that spanned the stream.
My father splashed in after it,
rescuing my lion which dried
slowly and crooked,
the sawdust clumped inside.
But the summer he stared out
over the lawn, the only sound
was ice cubes ticking
in the gin between us.
His daughters would be touched
and touched again.
He would not speak.
He slept curled tight
in my childhood bed.
I couldn't imagine how he'd rest,
shoulders curved against
its narrowness.

➤ Easter at Cassis

The narrow road runs high above the water,
turning in from pale cliffs
to run past thinning stone walls.
The hills are white and green with scrub,

the flowers glossy and unfamiliar. We carry
a picnic of yellow and white—
wine and pineapple, bread and cheese,
then lie on sunny ledges high above the sea,

watching families on the hard-pebbled beach
as easy in their nakedness
as we are new in ours.
On Easter Sunday I wake to bells,

the ringing changes pulling me toward
a ritual I want to ignore.
I walk through the empty market
to a whitewashed church set against a hill.

Inside, the flowers are bright, unapologetic—
no white lilies, all lush color
and full green. I search the missal
for the words ingrained in another language,

but I can't find my place, so I stop and listen
to the call and response,
the intonation of prayer, to sound
without meaning, softer, more forgiving.

➤ Elegy

Unexpected, it wings the smallest spears
so lightly, the touch of cold like the touch
of a new hand which asks the tentative body
to ache into a flowering that leaves the earth behind.
This is the season of darkness increasing,
of silence pressed against the panes. This is the first
bright chill of morning, the heat not yet turned on,
there is no refuge. There is only sunlight
silvered in pale tufts of grass,
this stinging alive in a season's turning,
like the moment after the news of your death,
when the flame-leafed tree outside my door
grew distinct in a terrible clarity,
the way some things are most
bright before their passing.

in memory of Ed Cox

➤ The Gentleman Caller Departs

The lights go out. Tom paid for his escape
with the money for the bill and Laura's
undreamt evening enacts itself in candlelight.
Fired for writing on company time,
a fragment on a shoebox lid,
Tom was helpless with the need to write
a few illusory words, then disappear—
But motion is only an attempt at solitude,
trying to arrive at the distance of thought, leaving
the mother's voice so far behind
that when it comes it only whispers.
Time is the longest distance between two places.
And as the past recedes from us
we raise it up again,
so even the mundane will be transformed,
the way *pleurosis* becomes *Blue Roses*
and even a broken figurine holds its glimmer in the dark.

➤ My Sister's Wedding

My father sits at the kitchen table,
lower lip thrust out, pretending to read
The New York Times, pretending not to be excited.
Early this morning the sky was opaque,
but the clouds unlocked themselves,
shivered apart, letting the cold spring sun
speckle the lawn. I remember believing
his predictions for sun or rain were sure knowledge.
The muffled hum of a blow drier and my sisters'
laughter seeps down through the walls from upstairs.
I sit with him at the kitchen table,
drinking coffee, reading the paper;
the mirrors of the house are filled
with daughters. In a window's reflection
he straightens his tie, I smile at his shadow
in the glass and look out over
the April yard coming green.
At the bottom of the slope is the brick springhouse
set in the curve of the grass and gravel drive.
When I was small he took me inside
to see where faucet water came from.
Inside the air was cool and still;
we stood on the cement ledge, looking into
the gray silence of deep water,
dark surface invisible.

➤ Sestina After Daylight Savings

Once I left the clocks on their old time for days,
bartering with abstraction, as if daylight
could be saved, or retrieved by human wish.
I want to accept the lengthening dark,
to take each season as it opens to the next.
Winter is the season I resist.

Winter is the only season I resist,
the sky like dirty milk, the shortened days.
The flight of geese against the whitened light,
their steady pulsing through the sky like a wish
forgotten. The slow descent at dark,
the safety of the marsh, never thinking *where next?*

Always the mind worries on what's next,
His eye is on the sparrow, but I resist
believing I'm included. The mind a field of earth-dark
furrows. I guide myself around a turn each day
muttering intricate charms, the incantatory wish
against the changing light.

Evening barely lasts in the rapid-falling light,
colors deepen, disappear. I haven't learned the dark's
somber palette, the subtleties of dusk. What I resist
is what I cannot see, and all that's next
comes anyway—my foolishness to wish
against the shortened day.

Spring forward, fall back, an autumn Sunday
slips into Standard Time. Nothing of the earth resists
the puddles icing over, the trees ash-dark.
Now in this still time the light's
most subtle roots begin, in the quiet before the next
showing, the silence before the wish.

The growing silence before the wish:
wordless, precarious time, as I resist
the fullness of all that's coming next.
There's richness in the sheltering dark,
it shields belief too frail for light,
the brilliance of the coming days.

And light keeps its own counsel, it doesn't resist
or want to know what's coming next. I wish
for light's patience in these days of early dark.

➤ At the Church Hall Rummage Sale

Paisley shirts with pointed collars,
chunk-heeled sandals, children's toys,

I stop for pie with latticed crust,
children selling lemonade.

A wall-eyed man with a crucifix
touches a musical jewelry box—

the plastic ballerina will not turn
on her velvet ledge. A mirror holds

her frozen arabesque. I touch
a corset whose form I couldn't fill,

its lengthened ribs and jutting cups
an ample woman's shape. I imagine

swelling flesh above the girded sides,
like warm bread rising

past the lip of a pan, a woman
who knew the secrets of laughter

and long marriage. A dogwood blooms
in the open window, white petals open

like a palm raised in prayer. Once I believed
in lives more simple than mine.

➤ Late

That whispered word, inconsequential
until coupled with a woman's voice.

Late, as if the cyclical could ever
be anything but perfect.

I touch myself and the gauzy paper
comes away bloodless, not even

the palest smudge of rose. Like a mirage
I can almost see the colors
of my body's core loosened, the dark
rope of blood unknotting, dropping down.
Sophomore year: driving a friend
to Richmond for an abortion. The red brick

clinic looked like my kindergarten.
The receptionist was kind, the waiting
room bright, and when they took her in
I walked down Linden Street,
past rowhouses and flowerbeds
while they took that small life from her.

I'd learned to drive a stickshift
so I could drive her home.
And waiting now, I'm back
in that October, driving south on 81,
the landscape changing from foothills
to the city's gray mesh, the guardrails

blurring into gray transparence.
I want to go back to these simple
divisions—metal and air, or the year
before they separated girls from boys,
and explained how blood
would come out of us each of us.

It seemed unbelievable.
It happened to everyone—my mother,
my teacher, the President's wife!
It would never happen to me.
I wouldn't join the sisterhood
of shadowed conversations, never guessed

that later I would pray for blood
as a farmer prays for rain.
I try to recall which dawn or night,
what failure might have caused this,
and on an afternoon that smells of snow,
a soft, dark turn releasing—.

➤ After Fighting

Severn found this place for him—
a willow in the western corner,
rows of cypress dark against the sky.

Graves in a line like hospital beds,
Keats rests near a whitewashed shed
littered with rakes, tin watering cans,

the broken lyre on his stone
not the symbol Severn thought
but Fanny's seal.

The mismatched rhythm of our steps
disturbs the tended gravel path.
Again, we're quiet after fighting.

It is January in Rome, the opacity
of winter sky is light
above the ancient walls. Our damage

unclear and unrelieved by passion.
You wake in mornings curled around
the absence of my shape.

I see from a distance,
down a crowded row of gravestones,
an angel draped across a tomb—

one arm loose against the air,
her wings are large and slack with grief.
Her body reaches forward

as if she had thrown herself
down on a bed, crying, one hand
reaching toward this world.

Emelyn Story, carved by her husband
who followed her death with his own
ten months to the day. Their marriage

lasted longer than Keats' life.
I imagine her husband
picking up his tools again,

tapping his grief into stone,
the careful, chiseled knocking,
hammering back to her youth,

hammering back to that purest
of wanting. I didn't know then
what such love required.

➤ The Silver Screen

The photos in their silver frames watch over us.

An eight by ten glossy, taken in Atlanta—
the opening night of “Gone With The Wind.”

The grandfather I had never met, elegant in a top hat.
My grandmother in furs, smiling from an unfamiliar face;

She liked to talk about the people that she knew,
how Clark Gable came to dinner.

When I was small I’d visit her dark apartment,
fake fire in the lobby grate.

In the polished wooden elevator, I watched
the diamond window fill with light and dark.

When my uncle came, martinis at noon.
She’d pour his second drink—

“Two wings to fly on!” She’d laugh and click her teeth.

Lunch was always the same—roast lamb with mint jelly,
mashed potatoes, string beans and soft onion rye.

I dug hollows in the potatoes, put butter in
and covered it, then slipped into the warm yellow.

A portrait of my mother hung in the hall. I wondered
if I’d ever grow to look so perfectly finished.

My mother buttons every button to the top.

My grandmother's hand was mutilated—half a nubble thumb,
two of her fingers shortened and skinny,

like chicken bones covered with skin.
My mother wouldn't tell me how it got like that.

In the bathroom and the bedroom there are pills
on silver trays. Jars of cream with silver lids.

All sealed tight, neatly in a row.

A hoosier girl who danced to New York—
vaudeville her escape. She silvered some secret

with brash stories of her past. The first time
my grandfather asked to see her home—

Mister, she said, *I know my way home*,
and she cackled when she told me,

I was fresh as paint!

She'd take me to the Gold Lake Dairy—
buy *The Racing Form*, *The Enquirer*, *Catholic New York*.

She tapped her nubbled stub against
the tabloid pictures: Caroline Kennedy—

no bra—shameful how her nipples showed.

Her apartment filled with figurines and books
She read "to keep up" my mother said.

My mother wraps her mother's secrets
around her like a shroud. Mysterious then

the books I was bequeathed: Marianne Moore's poems,
Yeats' *A Vision* with notecards tucked inside—

Reference to Countess Cathleen. Symbolism.

Walter Pater—Father of Symbolism?
Mother: A Cloudy Goddess—

➤ My Husband, Planting Roses

Roses won't grow here the neighbors all say—
but my husband turns the netted earth
and tills a border in the lawn.

Our first anniversary and already we know
each others' predilections—I protest
the expense, the extravagant gesture,
he listens, smiles, does not give in.

The branchy starveling bushes begin blooming
in late spring, but in this year of flooding
a powdered whiteness coats the leaves
taking back their sheen.

Finally in August heat, I am out of temper
and idly begin to weed. The lawn is taking back
the ground he claimed, and what I pluck at
as diversion, waiting for the mail,
now becomes specific—aiming at the fescue,
stealing back this stolen space.

Three bushes of the twelve have died,
their branches blackened, waxy-ended,
but the others start to bloom again.

I've made this mistake before—
expecting beauty to be fragile, underestimating
the persistence of luxuriance and color.

➤ The Frail Harmonic

I can't hear myself think, my mother would say,
and I'm sure it was true—four daughters
who prattled and bickered and sang—
though I couldn't imagine the sound of her thought,
or what space of quiet she required.
I sang in the car, sang in my room,
believing I'd find the trick
for singing harmony with myself:
that my throat could open
to sound in perfect thirds—
pitchpipe, harmonica, thrum in the chest.

Moored in the body
the soul hovers in the breath, our inconstant
motion toward an unheard melody.
Buddhist monks chanting toward a sacred sound
practice for years to achieve a doubled pitch,
their cavernous notes a chain of names for God,
deep as the turning in the earth's fierce center,
and above the rolling syllables a piercing
overtone, tethered to the earthly drum.

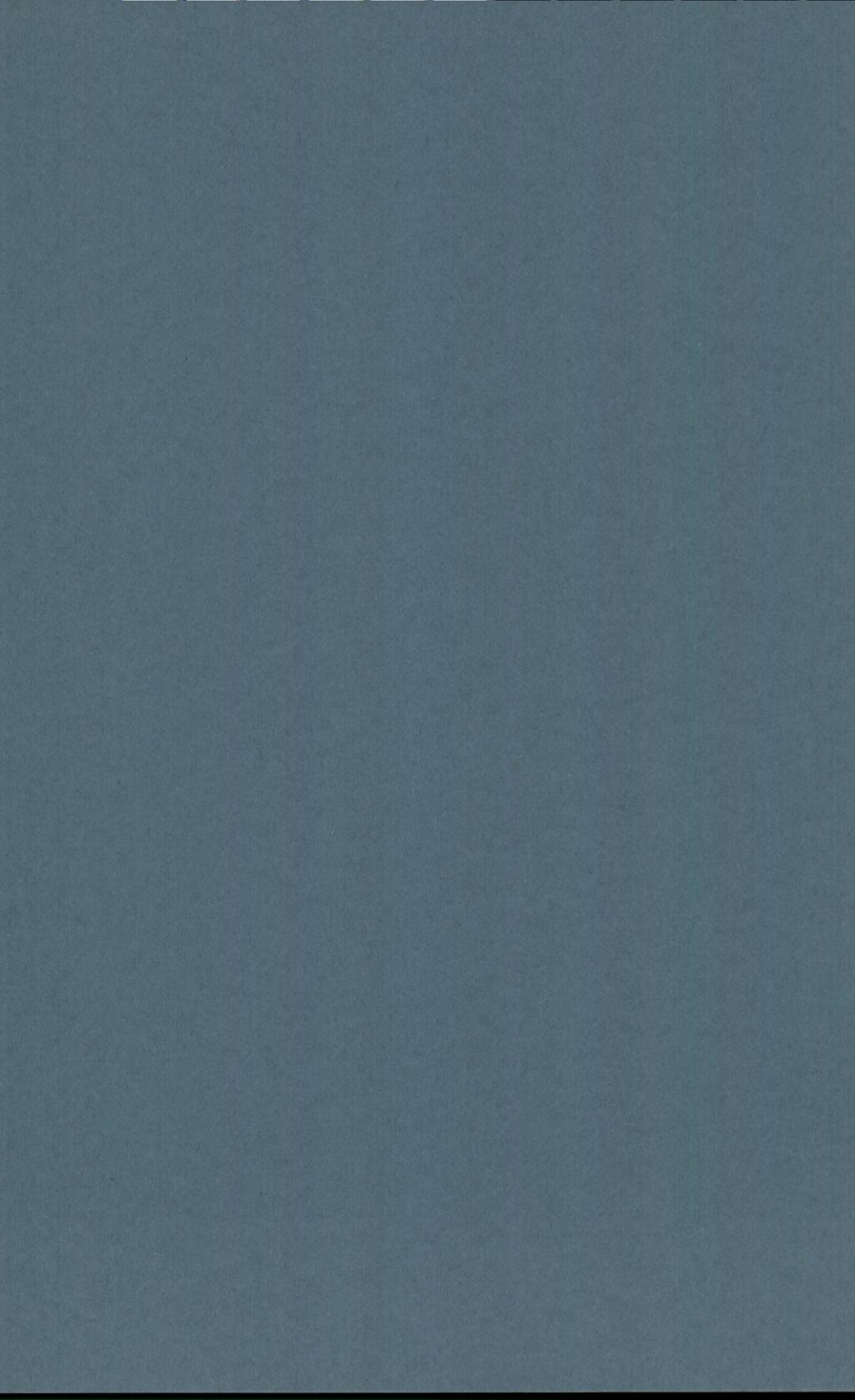
In unexpected solitude I am quiet in our house.
Words rise up against the silence of the page.
Shadows move on the wooden table, evidence of wind.
I'm passing through my mother's shadow—
she makes a settling motion, pressing down the air.

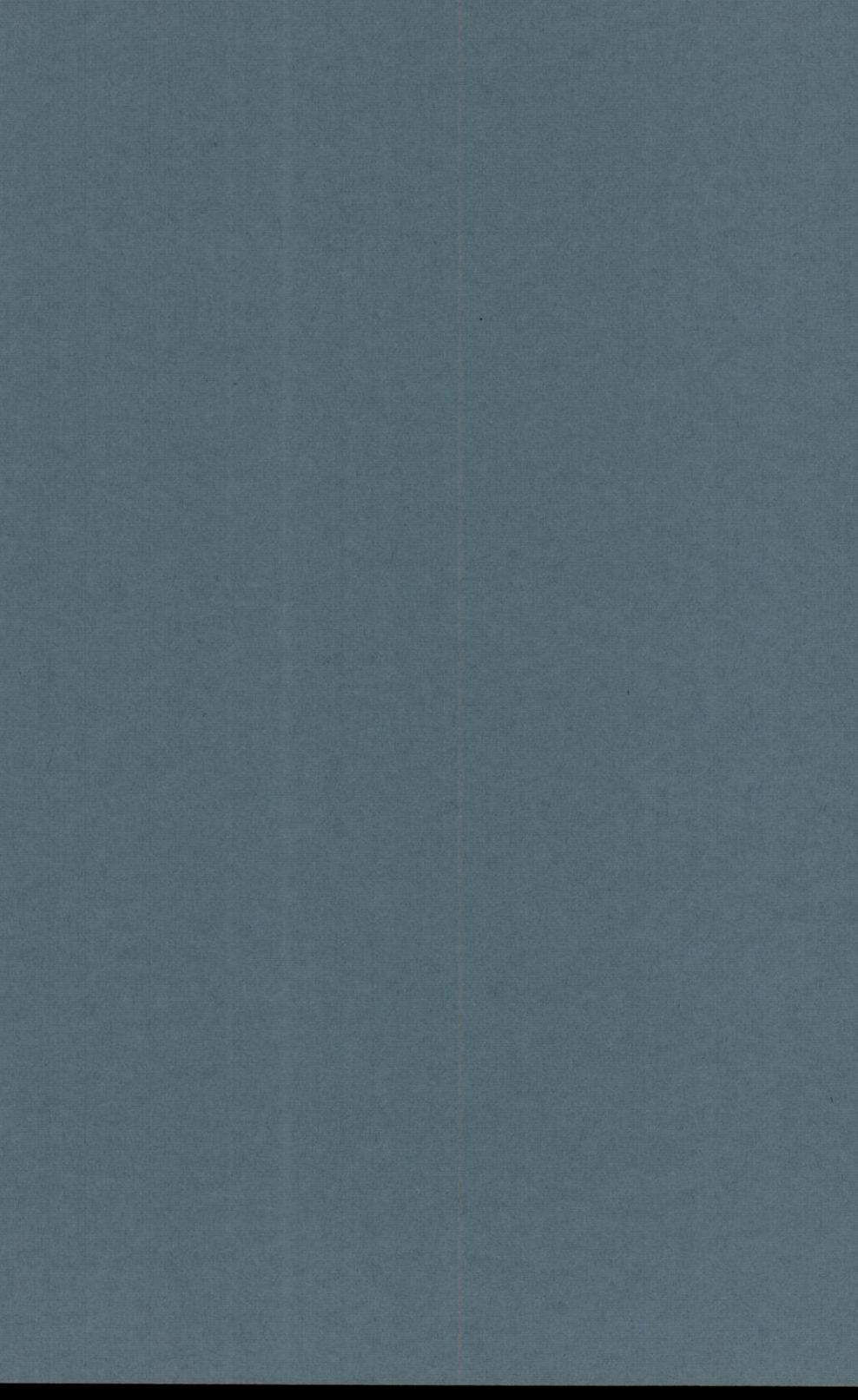
In summer's hovering quiet
before the starting of September life,
there is a spaciousness of mind, a sense of
listening in the silence, or not listening
but knowing, the still song of *I am*,
and touching with the mind's profusion
the delicate gap between this world and the elusive one,
the one that waits for our attention.



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