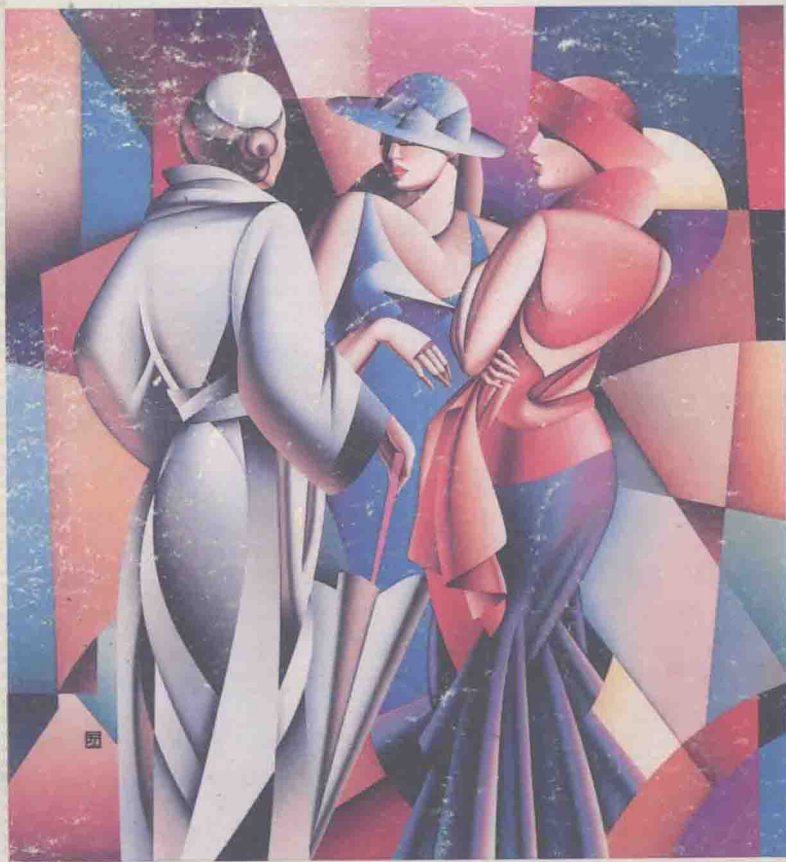


CAROLE MASO



GHOST DANCE

A NOVEL



"Carole Maso is that rare creature—an original!...From the first page to the last of this meticulously written first novel she strikes her own note: elegiac; epic."

—Edmund White

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GHOST DANCE

To my mother and father,
who offered me the creative dream
as if it was water or food or a place to live.
To Barbara, who encouraged me to live there.
And to Helen, who made it possible.

In memory of David Kennedy,
Kathleen McCarthy, and James Wright.

Part One

She is standing under the great clock in Grand Central Station and she is waiting for me. She does not shift her weight from one foot to the other, checking her watch every few moments, worrying about where I might be. She is not anxious at all, in fact, but calm, peaceful, at ease. She is so beautiful standing there. People whirl around her, talking, laughing, running, but they pause for a second when they see her, turning back to look as they hurry. She focuses in the distance, oblivious, it seems, to the life of the station, and looks straight ahead at a point still some way away, where the poem she has been struggling to finish for days will fall into place. She smiles as she feels herself come a little closer and then rests; there is no forcing it, she knows. She shifts her great attention to me. "Vanessa," she whispers, and she closes her eyes. "Vanessa," she says, guiding me through the treacherous streets to her. Slowly she clears a wide path for me through the snow and, as I step safely, in her mind, from the taxi onto the street, quite suddenly the poem is complete. As she places my foot onto the pavement, puts the fare in the driver's hand, and has me enter the station, she is overwhelmed by an immense, inexplicable joy. Nothing can equal this happiness, she thinks. She looks up at the snow that hugs the high, cathedral-like windows. She is dangerously happy. The day is beautiful. There has never been a better time or place to be alive, she thinks. There is no life more perfect than her own. And she is right.

She has just gotten off the train from Maine and she carries in her body that fierce New England coastline. She is rock strong—she has cast her restlessness into the sea. For her own she has taken the large, simple faith of the fisherman. I feel her as my taxi flies through snow. She pulls me toward her, toward her harsh, clear cold, toward her wild bramble bushes; I feel her irresistible winter in my bones.

The city sparkles like a jewel in the sun. The snow is blindingly white. She

is smiling. She is bathed in apricot. The poem is complete. It is true: the world is a cathedral of light.

On such a day as this, it is possible to believe that everything will be fine. We will understand our lives, we will be the best we can be. We will be brave. We will say what we meant to say.

On such a clear day it is possible to believe that we will live forever, that death was something we once invented, long ago, on a lazy summer afternoon when we had nothing better to do—a way to add texture, dimension, a way to change the pace of our lilting lives. On such a day it is possible to believe that sorrow will turn into one great vapor and blow off and be gone forever; that the childhood dream of fire will turn out to mean nothing in the end; and that our deaths, if they must be, will be timely, after eighty, and while we sleep.

As I shut the cab door and walk down the path through drifts of snow to her, I know that all of this is possible. We will have time for everything. We will say what we meant to say. It will all make sense. We will be fine.

I step into the safety of this great station and the feeling persists: it will all last forever. The building curves around me; all longings merge here. It will all go on and on: the glances, the hurried steps, the breaking voices, the tentative good-byes, the echo of joyous hellos. A young woman races across the enormous floor. In the sound of her high heels clicking, in her purse at her elbow as she buys her ticket, I know: it will last forever. She hurries on in every time, toward every life.

I smell the snow and breathe in the air of long ago. On the balcony, forty years before this, a young man all good looks and grim optimism stood smiling nervously. He stands there now, remembering his father's hesitant pride, his mother's tears as they waved him on to war. His mother wore the softest white gloves, his father a felt hat. He shakes his white head as he watches them, still waving and waving good-bye. They will wave forever, he knows. White gloves. A felt hat. They are long dead. It does not matter. This is our fate: to love too much—even the dead, who might not need our love.

We love too much—this man who cannot forget, the woman who rushes, and I who can feel her pull from the other side of the city. I see her as I run down the marble steps. Strains of classical music, the violin, the oboe come from the café at the top of the station. The light is fragile, the music is lovely, the whole station is moving and alive. There is no place more vital than this one, more exciting, more filled with promise. There is no better place on earth, nowhere else that can fill us with such hope. It will all go on. She is beautiful. People turn to look at her. The poem is complete. I run to her. There has never

been a better moment to be alive. I am immensely happy. Love makes it so. We love too much and still . . .

I get closer. She is wearing a large hat. She turns to me. The vision breaks. My mother is in deep trouble.

"Mom," I say quietly, touching her shoulder. She does not really recognize me. I know not to speak too loudly. "Mom," I say, "I'm sorry I'm late . . ." My voice trails off. She is not seeing me at all. I look away from her so that she might be spared the pain of this young woman, a college student overloaded with books, who talks to her so kindly and holds her hand and brushes her hair from her face. I look back at her, straighten her hat. She smiles. "You're very nice," she says. I look away.

The sharp arms of the great clock slice into the back of her neck and she lets out a small sigh.

"Oh, Mom."

"Darling," she says, "my darling." And with these words we are back in our places—home again—back in our hard love.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Mom," I say. "The snow," I whisper. But I know that she sees no snow, feels no cold.

She touches my face, brings her gloved hands to it, gently.

"Oh, Mom," I say. I will not look away. I will see her this time.

As she takes off her gloves I see that she is wearing a ring on every finger. Each of her nails, I notice, is carefully shaped and polished. This time I hear the sound of her bracelets in my ears as she puts her trembling hand to my face again. Around her neck and waist are scarves, gold chains, locket, ropes of silk, feathers, charms. I shut my eyes for a moment. Her eyes, shaded by the enormous flowered hat, are heavy with makeup, her cheeks are stained with rouge, her mouth a wild, brilliant pink.

She wears layers and layers of clothes, sweater over silk blouse over sweater, making her look like a bulky, large figure in the world—someone to reckon with. I should be used to this by now, I say to myself, and yet I never am. She has never looked this bad before, I think, armored in this way against simple dailiness, her protection from the world when she is not feeling well.

I take off her hat and there are dozens of braids in her hair, intricate knots, curls.

"Oh, Mom," I say, lifting the rows of chains that hang around her neck, weighing against her chest.

"What is it, Vanessa? What is it, honey?"

"You don't need all of this," I say.

"Hmm? What, dear?" Her voice tosses, rises, and falls in the ocean off of Maine. I focus on the large black tunnels that lead out to the trains.

"You don't need all of this."

She looks around as if I am talking about the station. She nods.

"Oh, they will tear this place down, too, I suppose," she says with a sigh.

I turn away from her again. I am so afraid. I should be used to this by now.

I turn my fear into one pure, intelligent motion and finger one by one the tiny clasps at the back of her neck, lifting the gaudy neckpieces away from her, taking the feathers and charms, the chains, away from her chest where they weigh so heavily. I would like to pluck from her face the moody emeralds that have made her look so strange to me.

"You don't need all this, Mom."

She clings to my words like a child. I slip rings from her fingers. I gently lift her arm up and take it out of the sweater. Slowly, carefully, I undress her in the center of the station as if we were the only ones there.

"It's the Topaz Bird, isn't it?" I say to her in a whisper as I unknot the scarves at her neck and waist. We are both children now. She nods. The Topaz Bird was the creature of my bedtime stories, invented by my mother so that I might better understand her shifting moods, her inexplicable sadness or rage or joy. It had become, in the years since I was grown, our code word for when she was not feeling well.

I slide the large silver Elsa Peretti bracelet down her smooth arm. I open her purse and place the eyeglasses she wears at these times back into their leather case. She does not need glasses.

"Yes," she says and tries to smile, "the Topaz Bird." She tilts her head back and looks up at the starry green ceiling. I can see the line where her makeup ends.

"Silly," she whispers, still looking up. "Silly," she says, shaking her head miserably.

"We'll just have to put some of this away," I say, putting more and more into her enormous purse. "You don't need all this, Mom."

I look up, too, and imagine the Topaz Bird there—its terrible claws, its beak curved and sharp, its feathers brutal, sharpening into points. It grows huge. It devours mice in front of me. It lands on my mother's head like a spiked crown, drawing blood from her scalp.

"How's my makeup?" she asks. She hands me a tissue. I wipe away layers of color.

"There. There now. You look good. You look great, Mom. Everything's fine." As I speak I look down to the floor and see that hundreds of tiny gold

chains encircle her ankles. I cannot control the surge of emotion that grows and breaks in me. It will not be fine.

"Mom," I say, "let me come back home with you." I have just come in by bus from a long Christmas break and am on my way back to college for the second semester. "I can take a train to school tomorrow. Really. It doesn't matter when I go."

She shakes her head tentatively at first, then decides. "No."

"Please."

"Vanessa."

I look at her hand, clenched in a fist. "No," she says, "I'm all right."

"What is it, Mom?" I ask. "What's in your hand?"

"Silly," she says, looking up to the cavernous ceiling where the Topaz Bird flies. "Silly. Silly," she says, biting her lip and trying not to cry, following my example.

She opens her hand and shows me a crumpled paper, something wounded in her palm.

"What is it, Mom? Do you want me to read it?" I ask her.

"Yes, would you?" she says, staring at my mouth, focusing hard.

I uncrumple the piece of paper. My hands are shaking. I see that it is in her handwriting. "Be careful," she whispers, "please."

I nod. For a while I simply stare at the piece of paper, looking at her handwriting, the swirls and dips, the flourishes, the looping *l*'s and *p*'s, and it gives me the courage to read. It says "New Year's Resolutions," and I cry with relief at my mother's earnest list.

"Don't cry," she says. I bite my lip and read them aloud:

- 1-Enjoy life more.
- 2-Work fewer hours. Relax more.
- 3-Take fewer trips/pack fewer clothes.
- 4-Spend more time with the children.
- 5-Help the unfortunate.

I laugh and laugh and she laughs with me. "They are good ones, I think," I say.

"Yes," she says, "I miss more things now," and she gazes off, lost in all that means to her.

"I like this one," she says. "Take fewer trips/pack fewer clothes. What do you think?" We try to pick up the two enormous suitcases at her sides and pretend we cannot.

"Really, Mom, how long was it you were gone for?" I ask.

"Oh, about a week, I think," she says, and we laugh.

"You're all grown up," she says, looking at me like the college student she remembers herself being. "I realize now how much living we've missed together. But for now—you'd better go—your train."

"No, Mom. I don't want to leave you."

"Vanessa, yes," she says.

"You'll need help with your suitcases," I say. I am still smiling.

She shakes her head no.

"Please go now," she says, and I recognize the tone of her voice. It means she is not going to change her mind.

"But—"

"Please go. You'll miss your train."

"I'll call you Sunday," I say.

"Oh, don't forget to call." She is taking the Elsa Peretti bracelet from her bag.

"Mom," I say, "are you all right?"

"Yes," she nods. "I'm fine."

I turn and begin to walk away from her, then turn back. "Mom!" I shout. I can't bear to say good-bye yet.

I am some distance from her. The snow presses against the high semicircular windows. I feel it hugging us, pressing us, telling us to part, parting us. Her face has changed. Her voice now, as she begins to speak, is not raised but still somehow separates itself from the noise of the station. I can hear it perfectly. She looks up at the snow, then to me. She is focused and clear now, lucid in this last moment.

"I have loved you my whole life," she says.

She lifts her beautiful braceleted arm into the air. "Go now."

She waves good-bye.

"You must never forget, Vanessa," my mother told me over and over through the years I was growing up, "that the Topaz Bird means us no harm." This is how she would always end her final story of the night just as I was falling into sleep.

"You must never forget," she would whisper, leaning over my bed as she turned out the light and covered me with night, as she kissed me hard on the forehead, "it means us no harm."

She would enter my large, odd-shaped room, sometimes ecstatic, sometimes exhausted, sometimes sad and afraid, but the story never changed and it seemed to calm her. She would rest in the telling of it. I helped her, too, I think,

in my half-sleep, dreaming the bird with her, inventing it over and over, reaching for it, reaching, my whole body straining to see it.

"Only the luckiest people," she'd begin, "are born with a bird flying over their lives."

"Only the very luckiest," I'd say back to her, she leading, I following her through the story I knew by heart. She would start a sentence, and I would complete it. At times we talked together, our voices weaving in and out of each other's. We were like lovers drifting off to sleep together, whispering in the dark. I loved her voice at these times, it was so sweet and peaceful. It was the voice of an angel, the voice of a star.

"Only the luckiest people are born with a bird flying over their lives. It's no ordinary bird, mind you," she'd smile.

"It's not a green parrot," I said.

"Oh, no!" she said. "Not a green parrot."

"It's not a cardinal."

"It's not a dove either. It's not . . ."

"A pink flamingo," I'd say.

"Or a toucan," my mother would say.

"No, it's not a toucan."

"It's more beautiful . . ." My mother closed her eyes. "It's even more beautiful than a swan."

Her golden robe shone in the dark room. She was asking me to see the Topaz Bird with her. But I could not imagine a more exotic creature than my mother. I would have been happy to have lived in a world defined solely by the parameters of her arms, to have sunk into her large, soothing voice and stayed there, safe in her dark love, but even before I could get comfortable in her lap she had begun telling the story and pointing my head away from her, asking me to look upward, to grow wings though I had just barely learned to walk.

"It's even more beautiful than a swan," we said in unison. "I call it the Topaz Bird," she sighed. "A bird that shines like topaz. A bird so beautiful that you scarcely can bear to look at it." I knew what my mother meant. I felt I could barely look at her straight on, most times.

"But when you do, once you finally get the courage, your eyes begin to shine, bright, bright."

"To become the Topaz Bird somehow," I said, pausing for a moment trying to picture this. "It has the most magnificent—"

"Plumage," my mother said. I loved the way she said plumage, the beautiful mouth she made for the word plumage.

"Plumage," I said, trying to imitate her.

“And you must follow it—wherever it takes you. You must not be afraid,” she whispered. “It means us no harm.”

I love her in the deepest cells of my sleep. I feel her warm breath as I descend into sleep and hear her voice long after she has left the room. The Topaz Bird sings in her throat. The Topaz Bird flies from her mouth. I could almost see it those nights. There was such longing there in the dark.

I would love to follow that bird through my moody half-sleep. “My precious, precious,” I would say, reaching, straining.

She kisses me on the forehead and shuts off the light. I have never seen the Topaz Bird but I feel that something of it forms with the part of my mother I keep after she has left the room—her smell on me still, her kiss resting on my forehead. Each night, I take the simple, strange story into sleep and dream it.

I will find that precious bird. I build a nest in my ear for it. I prepare a place. I make a circle of my forefinger and thumb and fill it with something soft. I open the palm of my hand and offer it.

Oh, if I saw that bird—

Oh, if I saw that bird I would not hesitate to follow. The kiss lingers . . .

Though I am nineteen years old now, I have never seen that precious bird, but the kiss lingers. “Mom,” I say.

She is so far away.

Mother, here are the parts of the story you forgot to tell, the parts of the story I learned in my sleep.

When the Topaz Bird finally appeared after hundreds of years, your mother recognized it, even before opening her pale eyes, and through the layers of her fatigue she let out a small cry. Her family had waited so long and intently for that mythic creature to appear again that she could hardly fail to see it, even in the dark, even through her lidded eyes, as it flew past the hospital window at the hour her first child was born.

The doctors had advised my grandmother, a young woman with a rheumatic heart, not a grandmother at all then, not to have children; the consequences would be grave. But, holding in her arms her healthy baby, which felt quite strong, she knew it had been the right thing. “I will have children,” she had told the doctors, “there is nothing you can do about it.” The bird flew by again. She opened her eyes. She saw only a blur but she knew what it was, and the pain from childbirth was mingled with an enormous joy. So the bird was the Bird of Luck, she thought, and of Good Health.

She heard its song. No one as far as she could remember, not even George,

had ever mentioned its song. She wondered whether anyone had ever heard it before. She did not know if it was a happy song or a sad song—that was the way she was accustomed to thinking—but its beauty brought tears to her eyes, and she would write in her diary often of the haunting melody that followed her up and down the sloping terrain of her illness.

As she sat up in the white bed holding her daughter close, the melody grew louder. She struggled to get up so that she might see the bird clearly at last. When she finally reached the window and looked out into the snow, she gasped, for she saw exactly what she had pictured since she had first heard the story as a little girl. It was perched on the bare branch of a chestnut tree. It was tiny, tiny, a sort of hummingbird, she thought, with a few crimson feathers, green at the throat, and possessing an all-over topaz glow. It was beautiful, even more beautiful than they had said, and the young mother and her daughter stood drenched in its magnificent light.

Grandma Alice knew right away that her life was a bordering life, that the bird was not really hers to see, and she wondered, looking at it, what transformations the Topaz Bird had made on that journey from the branch of the chestnut tree to her brain. She was aware that she was probably not seeing it clearly. She held her daughter up to the glow and watched her new eyes turn from pale blue to violet to deep blue to turquoise then back to pale blue again. What did the bird, here on this first day of March, mean for her sweet, smiling little girl?

She held my mother at the window for what seemed a long time. The Topaz Bird continued to sing and did not move from the tree, and my grandmother, too, standing in the brilliant light, felt only an hour old. She felt as if the world were only beginning for her, too. In fact my grandmother *was* entering a new stage as she stood before the Topaz Bird, having brought it back, after so long, with her daughter's birth: it was the beginning of the end of her life.

Chased back to bed by the nurses, the Topaz Bird flown off, the baby back in the nursery, my grandmother had a chance to think now for the first time about what was happening. There, as she drifted in and out of sleep, each member of the Hauser family appeared before her, perfectly clear against the hospital white. So the dead are even more detailed in appearance than the living, she sighed, looking at the knotted hands, counting the wrinkles, noting the many tones that made up the color of hair. She felt exhausted.

They were still searching for the Topaz Bird as she conjured them. Since the reunion in 1900 when they were alerted of the bird's existence, each Hauser had searched for it, dreamt of it, convinced they would see it if they were diligent, patient. In the middle of many nights they had opened their eyes,