

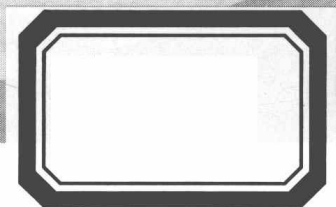
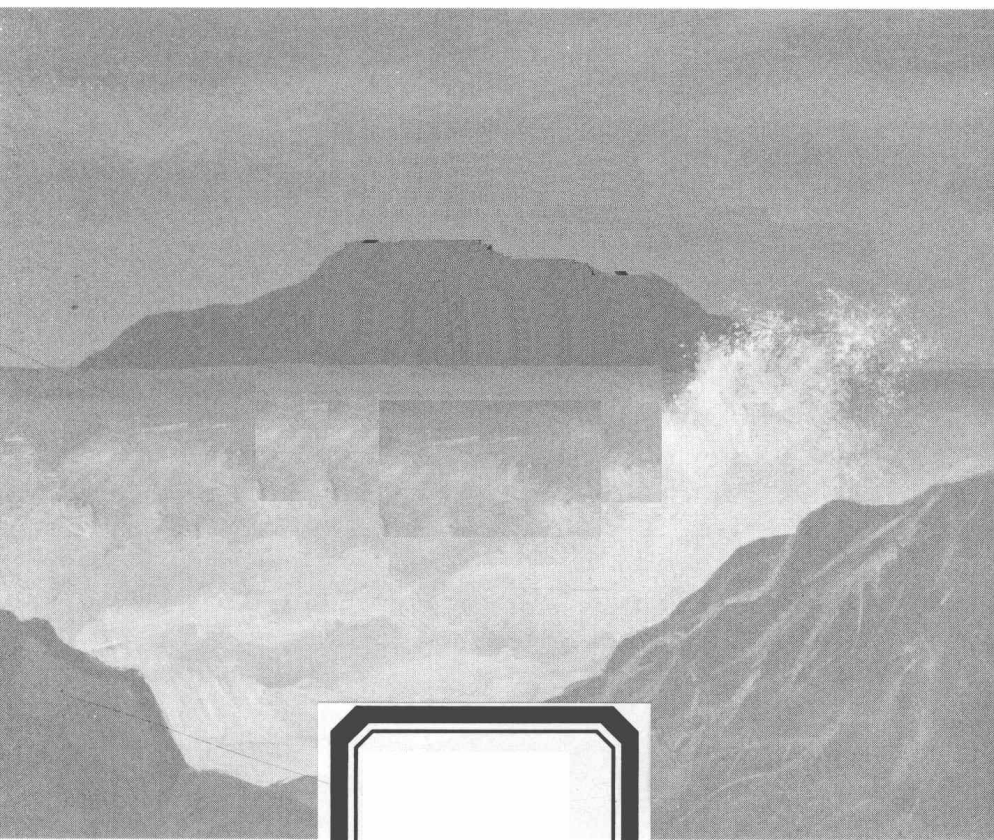
ROUGH CRADLE



Betsy Sholl

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ROUGH CRADLE

Also by Betsy Sholl

Late Psalm

Don't Explain

The Red Line

Rooms Overhead

Appalachian Winter

Changing Faces

For my sisters—

Jane Wood

Martha Folts

Joan Sofield, 1942–2006

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And it is written in the book that we shall not fear.
And it is also written, that we also shall change,
Like the words,
In future and in past,
In the plural and in isolation.

—Yehuda Amichai

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I



THE SEA ITSELF

Here, on solid ground, a blue jay lands,
beautiful and shrill, looking right at me,
banging a seed over and over, as if

he'll never get it right—another creature
I once crudely dismissed. I'm sorry
for all my old arrogant thoughts,

for the man who followed me
one whole summer, a grabber, swallower,
a devil in Bermuda shorts. But really,

his hands were so thin and shaky,
it was easy to slip through,
all it cost me was an old blouse,

the buttons flying off into the pine needles
and white sand of our struggle.
I left him on his knees weeping,

my blue shirt dripping from his hands.
Of course, I said No. But I'm sorry
I said it so fiercely that day

there wasn't room for pity or anything else.
I'm not sorry I said No to the storm tide
that dragged me out, then tossed me back

like an undersized fish, an hysterical teenager
flung on shore. Thick quilted clouds overhead,
sand blowing through tufts of beach grass—

such a total *No*, it became a kind of *Yes*,
so the world was suddenly everything at once,
solid and shifty, stormy and calm.

For years I told this story all wrong.
Even now, my words are just a net
holding fish, while the sea itself slides through,

that slippery, unfathomable
Yes & No, that everything-at-once
impossible to name—

even if you were spared,
even if you have many more songs
than the harsh one you learned so well.

IN-FLIGHT

On Flight 293 from Atlanta,
 we passed through castling clouds
and aerial oceans, abstracted from our lives

like the contents of our bags
 the airport x-ray exposed
as gray filmy shapes, ghosts of things

we thought we couldn't do without.
 Past the slick ads, the airline magazine
showed men in battered sombreros,

woman wrapped in shawls, who spend
 their Lenten months inventing
elaborate designs out of dyed sawdust

to dribble and rake across roadside plots,
 repaving the streets for one holy week
into soul paths, swirled with their wildest prayers.

And for what, the reporter writes,
 more than once, as if perplexed
and really wanting to know: *for what*

all that money, that time spent on dust—*dust*—
 over which the Virgin
with her chipped nose and serene gaze will pass,

her makeshift palanquin teetering
 on the shoulders of young men
led by trumpeters loudly bearing down

on those fragile tableaux. At dawn it begins,
the commotion sending birds up
out of the trees as if to proclaim

things really could change
in a flash, in sunlight on brass.
Effort and plan, all the grand design

made just for this moment's noisy arrival—
for the dust's bright ruin,
and for ruin to be shaken off...

DOING TIME

Prison poetry workshop

They call me “Babe” and make a kissing noise
from inside their bars and inside their rage.
Most of them are men, though they act like boys

who’ve played too hard and broken all their toys.
Now they’re trying to break their metal cage.
They yell out “Babe,” make that loud kissing noise

as if their catcalls mean they have a voice
routines and bells can’t break. “It’s just a phase,”
their parents must have said, when they were boys.

Don’t ask what they’re in for; let them enjoy
their small audience, their short time on stage:
“Hey, Babe, how about”—then that kissing noise.

In class they want to rhyme, their way to destroy
all evidence of anguish on the page.
They can’t bear to remember being boys.

Some study law, some use another ploy,
daydreaming they’ll do time, but never age.
“Hey, Babe” means “kiss off” to that cellblock noise,
to broken men in here since they were boys.