

A Shaker Sister's Hymnal

Elizabeth Pinborough

Come Life, Shaker Life

The frost grows fierce upon the pane,
crystals cluster in tight geometry. Inside my
glove my fingers freeze. I gasp the cold until I
am dumb: until my eyes are arctic marbles
rolling blue and plumb in their sockets: until
my leaden tongue sinks in my mouth.

The moon cracks above my head. It is the
aspen wood-shaven splinter by which I see. I
work beauty on the windows of sleeping
Sisters. With sticks I scrawl trees and leaves,
ferns and bees, stars and stalactites.

I work all night, my mind a-glitter with
unearthly sight. Ice crystals splay into arches
and doorways, turrets and towers, bridges
and bowers. I have come at last to God's
garden gate.

An oil lamp inside seems the warm glow of
heaven. It beckons me on in my wild, flower
tracings. And above I see the winged angels
racing, on stars interlacing, their wings afire
as they fling themselves against the sky.

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My spine freezes. I draw the salty crescents
large, with small, furry stars. They imbibe the
moon's hard, white glow.

Inside my boots my toes are numb, I am
unable to step once the mural is done. As I
stumble to bed the horizon brings the
revelation of day, a prophecy of bread:

I will work with my bones. I will grind the wheat. I will build and atone; bread alone will I eat. On each stone I will write "Hallowed be Thy name." I will not seek earthly fortune or gain.

* * *

I Want to Gather Down

The winter bleeds, and freezes, and all with it. Godspeed could not overtake it. In all God's goodness, could he not give us endless springs, chased with rain? Towers of foxgloves for bees to roam?

Still, there are little gifts. In the sunlit kitchen I knead and knead in the kinetic posture my knuckles make. I inhale the yeast and red cracked wheat; their scents mingle, becoming heavenly meat.

I share this meat with all I see—farmers hauling loads of grain, beggars dressed in threadbare robes, children on a lumbering wain—hags, thieves, harlots, rogues.

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With the sun overhead, I pick weeds of pain. They grow profusely in the kitchen garden. They suffocate seeds with their greedy brown roots and sap the sunlight from other fruits.

Yet, apples prosper in the orchard. I walk among this world of trees. Ladders stand stark in the morning mist, awaiting the eventual hum of bees. Dewdrops glisten on the apples' skin; all reflect the glow within.

I lift my firkin and ascend a ladder, the crooked ladder by the pond. The wooden rungs ring and echo; the earth resounds with

heaven's beat. But as I climb, my firkin grows weighty. I can no longer lift my feet.

My woolen dress hangs heavily. I am but a bony rack for clothes. My heart is hard and full of dread. My feet are rooted in the earth. My heart is rooted in the body of my birth. I feel the tug of heavenly traces but cannot move.

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The Burning Day

The Sabbath dawns with quiet fire. I inhale its pale, blue light. Angels press in around my bed, their gowns glowing amber bright.

By degrees, the sun increases. I rise and walk through burnished halls.

Piles of light cram into corners and jam my chamber door. I lift my limbs into a porcelain tub. The sun's hot rub ribs my skin into brilliant, scaly furrows.

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Outside, leaves are lit on tree-like pyres. Windowpanes ripple and fold under the bold, bright heat. The floorboards warp—wood flares and tears itself into dusty curls.

I gather these ashes in my palm; they flicker gray and golden red.

I feel an incorporeal flame within. It burns outward, consuming eyes, hair, flesh, and skin. My mind melts. It has become a globe of purest glass, annealed with wisdom by godly blast.

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Who Will Bow and Bend like the Willow

As I walk to meeting across the grass, angels alight on windows and eaves. They are hymning and praising and comforting the bereaved.

Behind me I feel the airy shuffle, hear the woolen ruffle, sense the white presence of vanished Brothers and Sisters.

With an echoing crack I stumble on the granite meetinghouse stoop.

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Under the cerulean ceiling we stand, like spires, until a single voice rings out the hollow *lo-lodde-lodde-lodde-lo-lodde-lo*.

Now the spires start to move. We stomp our soles with ringing clomp as we slowly pace in circular pairs.

The floor quakes as the room shakes. I labor and clap, march and sing. I hear the beat of angels' wings.

I traverse the verse of every song. Swept along by movement and voice, I whirl and bend in vision's currents, strong.

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Pleasant Walk

The room revolves as the sky dissolves; my bodily sense has long been spent. A new landscape appears—a veil is rent—and I see a world beyond the ken of human eyes.

A towering mulberry tree appears; its leaves are cross-wise intertwined. Beneath the tree a table stands, with exotic fruit, delicate wine. I

sit at the table and drink until it spills from
my lips.

Straightway I see a dwelling place, peerless in
its form and grace. Within, angels give me
garments new and present me with fine
trinkets—colored balls and jeweled boxes—
not a few.

Here spirits dance in union sweet. Between
them I see a staircase rise. It spirals and
spirals toward unseen skies. A rushing wind
flies from its heights and sweeps me,
breathless, to its clime.

The universal star shines above; its amber
light suffuses sight. My feet are led from step
to step. Below me dwellings constellate,
forming a geometric homestead.

A gold gate gleams ahead; Sisters and
Eldresses await me there. With joyous shouts
they urge me on, guiding me with eager care.
I stretch and reach to touch their hands but
cannot shake my earthly bands.

Sudden mists cloud my eyes, and I fall—
through the hands of the dead.

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I'm on My Way to Zion

The autumn sky dies in purple silk, while the
moon wanes scarlet, saffron, and pearl. A
clock is ticking on the wall, like the ringing
echo of soft footfalls.

My painted floor is grooved and worn from
nights of marching, treading thorns. Yet lines
of copper nails still shine—small stars planted
in the pinewood.