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Cold Stone, White Lily

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COLD STONE, WHITE LILY

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

"Cold Stone, White Lily" is a suite of twenty-seven poems written from the point of view of Anne Wyngfield, a fourteenth-century English Anchoress who looks back upon her life from old age. The poems cover a range of life topics spanning girlhood, adolescence, marriage, motherhood, and re-birth as anchoress, a solitary urban Christian recluse. The project includes a three-part introduction, a timeline of her life, and a map of the area in which she lived, the poems, and a bibliography.

Keywords: Anchoress, Fourteenth-England, Poems, Anne Wyngfield

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INTRODUCTION

I. THE PROJECT

Cold Stone, White Lily is a suite of poems that explores the life experience of Anne Wyngfield, a fourteenth-century English Anchoress who looks back upon her life from old age. The collection combines my work as a poet in the M.A. English Creative Writing Concentration with a broad scholarly interest in the fourteenth-century vernacular literary tradition and in the particulars of the anchoress as a part of fourteenth-century life. Thus, "Cold Stone, White Lily" introduces Anne Wyngfield, an anchoress in Bishops Lynn, Norfolk County, UK with the goal of creating compelling poems in an authentic historical voice. The work is a mixture of poetry and scholarship.

My interest in the medieval English anchoress began in Dr. Mary Flowers Braswell's class, Medieval Culture, where we studied the Ancrene Riwle, a thirteenth-century instruction manual for three sisters about to become anchoresses. The work was written by an anonymous cleric. The disciplined religious practice of the anchoress, the austerity of her life, and her unusual role as an urban recluse was striking. While she was expected to focus on the spiritual practice of attaining union with the Divine, she was also a community advisor and therefore developed importance within her community. In the section of the work entitled "The Outer Riwle," the Riwle author admonishes the anchoress not to dally at the "squint," the window of the cell that opened to the public. She must avoid gossip and interaction with men. According to the Ancrene Riwle, such

behavior was not befitting an anchoress, whose life commitment was to serve God, Church, and Community.

What was it like to be an anchoress? How did a woman come to this profession, and why? What did this role mean for her and for her society? No hard evidence indicates that the anchoress was "walled up" and pronounced "dead" to the world as a bizarre and severe form of religious fanaticism or punishment. No existing manuscripts give voice to the life of any medieval English anchoress. Julian of Norwich explicated the theological results of her visions of Christ, but she did not tell us why and how she became an anchoress or anything about her daily life. Consequently, scholars rely upon speculation supported by research in fields, such as archeology, anthropology, feminist and religious studies, and sociology. "Riwles" exist in manuscript form that offer advice for some specific anchoresses although these rules were not written by anchoresses themselves, but by male advisors. While these guides may be well-intentioned, erudite, and devout, their voices are not those of the anchoress. We are left with silence.

During the summer of 2008, I traveled to England to experience the physical surroundings of an anchoress and to spend time in anchor holds. To write poems or develop Anne Wyngfield's voice, I had to look at plants and sky, poke through archives, meet with church officials and local inhabitants, and percolate. I was awarded UAB's Ireland Award for scholarship and travel funds. In August 2008, I set out for the UK with a blank notebook and a plan.

I visited four different anchor hold sites around England--three in East Anglia and one in Shere, Surrey. I chose them based upon prior research. After visiting all four, I chose King's Lynn, formerly Bishop's Lynn, as the setting for Anne Wyngfield's life. All

Saint's Church is located in King's Lynn and it is the site of an anchor hold in excellent condition. I met Father Paul Kinsey, Rector at All Saint's, who invited me to spend time in the hold. We shared lively conversation. Before I traveled to King's Lynn, I looked at photos of All Saint's Church and anchor hold. One's experience deepens enormously when one crosses stone, hears rain, and sees the candle flicker in shadows on the straw covering the floor. In the hold at All Saint's Church, I was exactly where anchoresses prayed hundreds of years ago when the world was both very different and very much the same. I researched at the town library and gleaned many details of life in Lynn. I walked extensively, looked up flora and fauna, and studied the geography of the region. I slept when the day turned to dark, and I woke before light. I spent much time at the church and in the hold, and I wrote down my impressions and recorded my research.

I also traveled to Norwich to the site of the most famous English anchoress Julian of Norwich, author of the Revelations of Divine Love, an important fourteenth-century theological work that is part of the early vernacular literary tradition alongside the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland. Julian's anchor hold was damaged during the Reformation but was re-built at the original location after World War II. It is widely visited. At the Julian Research Centre adjacent to the church, the public is invited to use the fine collection of works pertaining to Julian, English Mysticism, and women's religious studies. I took advantage of the opportunity. I later spent time at Norwich Cathedral where I met a woman named Jill, who was getting her MA in Pastoral Theology and is the chaplain at the cathedral. She took me around and showed me the Julian window, a stained glass portrayal of Julian kneeling in prayer. Jill said she had some interest in anchoresses and paused. She often thought about the burning of heretics

staged outside the Cathedral. She wondered if Julian of Norwich, famous for writing about the loving relationship with the Creator ("*And what is it about? It is about love*."), might have smelled the burning flesh. "How did she have the courage and conviction to determine that God is love?" Jill asked, looking at the glass.

From Norwich I went to the small town of Willingham located between Cambridge and Ely on the path of what was once the only road through the Fens built by the Romans. The church was halfway between the cathedral at Ely and the seminary at Cambridge. It is the site of some rare medieval murals of saints and a pregnant Virgin Mary that were uncovered under layers and centuries of paint. There, just off the altar, is the door that opens into a small stone room with beautiful arches and fanciful corbels of animals, such as a pig and lion. My generous guide Jon Edney said that Henry the III had used the anchor hold as a treasury and so made it impenetrable because he was planning to stay in the area for a short time. Inside the hold, the squint or window allowed the anchoress inside to see the mass. Unlike the hold in King's Lynn, this squint was angled so that the congregation could not see inside the room. The thick door was arched and locked from either inside or outside. It was hinged in such a way that it offered privacy to the anchoress in her cell.

The last site I visited was in the south in Surrey in the village of Shere. This area was once the playground of the Royals, and it remains one of the most affluent villages in England. In the fourteenth century, an anchoress, one Christine Carpenter was enclosed at St. James Church in Shere. She eventually left the anchor and later petitioned the pope to be re-admitted. The anchor hold no longer remains, but the trefoil window and squint are visible from inside the church. In Shere I met a villager, Paul Moorcraft, the author

of a novel based on the Christine Carpenter story, Anchoress of Shere. Moorcraft is an international journalist, the founder of the Institute for International Diplomacy, and the author of several other books on war correspondence. Anchoress of Shere became quite famous and controversial in the little village of Shere. When asked why, Moorcraft replied:

> The novel caused some local controversy because the more religious types in the community thought I had traduced the memory of the holy anchoress by bringing sex into her story, and rather violent sex to boot. Some of the local amateur historians thought I had played fast and loose with historical facts. A few others were shocked by the anal rape scene. A church official suggested burning the book. I should have quietly donated some, and got a film crew to film the small bonfire in the square. Damn good publicity. But the vast majority of the locals bought and liked the book, and it kept selling in the Surrey Hills for eight years until it went out of print.

Paul showed me the village home where Christine's ghost is said to be visible at certain times, looking pale and mournful, walking about the house.

When I conceived the project, I tried to map out the biography of Anne Wyngfield, but I found that the appearance of images, phrases, and poetic theme led me into the unfolding of her life history. Anne Wyngfield emerged from the damp, silent stones of the anchor holds and from the riverbanks and fields of Lynn. The poems took shape slowly, beginning with "Apology," a poem in which the old anchoress decries her ability as a poet while asserting her poetic voice, her desire to communicate the experiences of her life, and her mystical union with God in love.

A richness of experience emerged in the poems. This richness informed her life as part of fourteenth century society, as a human woman, and as a mystic. In the poem "Flame," Anne describes early visions of sacred union. "Thirteen" is the expression of a typical girl who is eager to go to her secret place to be alone. The poems progress

chronologically as Anne follows the path of a human woman as lover, mother, widow, and later mystic. Embedded in her journey, as in "First Kiss," is a transcendent sacredness that illuminates even the most common experience.

Writing the poems demanded an immersion in the details of the fourteenth century and in the process whereby a woman arrived at the decision to commit her life to union with the Divine in the vocation as anchoress. Anne Wyngfield was so connected to the sacred and to the divinity of life already that her formal decision was simply a confirmation of everything else she had been doing. When she reached middle age, she was ready to reach in and take hold of what had whispered in her since she was a girl. "The Call" communicates her process.

Anne emerges with so much practical ability and toughness, as in the poem "The Plague," braided together with an incredible sensuality expressed in "Ninth Month." She inhabited different theaters of devotion – as daughter, as a young woman in the world, as a wife and lover, as mother, and finally as a spiritual practitioner and public servant.

In each section of her life, Anne explores a different role or container. In the fourteenth century, the entire space of society was sacred and all roads led to the cathedral. The anchoress was a kind of super-charged figure, attached to the church-stripped of adornment, and highly potent spiritually. A gradation or radiation of containers – the womb, the reliquary, the tomb, the anchor hold, and the cathedral, represent circles of sanctity. Hence, Anne moves from the sacredness of daily life to a formalized sacred sphere or theater of engagement. She is a conduit of sacredness for the entire society. Her role is juxtaposed with the role of the Church in "Audience with the Bishop." She seeks authentic spiritual union while the Church seeks earthly power and

control. The final poem, "Last Poem," knits the collection together as Anne re-gathers the memories that she has cast off for the reader. She offers to take the place of her friend Thomas who is condemned to be burned, not because she is a martyr, but because she lives in eternal union with the divine. She is in love, ultimately.

Cold Stone, White Lily was greatly informed by the work of Diane Wakoski. In an essay entitled "Creating a Personal Mythology" in the collection Toward a New Poetry, Wakoski writes of a fictional event in a poem:

> in some mythic or psychic way, it was truer than my true history, part of which was boring, and part of which I was ashamed of and felt I could never tell anyone. So I invented the emblematic experience. It is, I think, as much a part of my history now as whatever is real about my history.

The voice and life of Anne Wyngfield came forth in poems and merged into a personal mythology. I used my own first name in the project as a means of connecting with the anchoress-poet via the shared word. "Cold Stone, White Lily" is an alchemical process in which scholarly detail is poured into a poetic chalice, resulting in the twenty-seven poems in this collection.

II. The Life of Anne Wyngfield

Cold Stone, White Lily takes place in fourteenth century England. The poems were written from the point of view of a fourteenth-century English anchoress, a solitary urban Christian woman recluse. Her name is Anne Wyngfield, and she is from an area in East Anglia called Bishop's Lynn, later changed to King's Lynn at the time of the Reformation. In the poems, Anne looks back across her life from her position as an elderly anchoress.

As a member of the county gentry, Anne's father Robert owned and managed an estate outside of Lynn. Anne's mother Clara came from a prosperous merchant family. Although their marriage was a successful business arrangement, a true romance existed between the two. Her parents Robert and Clara Sampson had four children of whom only Anne and her brother Edward survived into adulthood. Robert and Clara leased land to tenants in a shifting economic landscape due in part to a labor shortage following the plague. They also raised livestock. Although they were a well-to-do family, their home consisted of a large wooden hall with stables attached.

The Sampson family's high level of literacy was uncommon in the fourteenth-century, especially among women. Clara Sampson, however, was from the merchant class, giving her more mobility and access to teachers and manuscripts than was available to most women. She wanted to learn. Before moving to Lynn to marry Robert, she read English, French, and Latin. Robert was not so educated, but he was capable and practical. Anne and Edward learned to read from Clara. Texts were scarce at this time, but the monastics in Lynn participated in an unofficial lending community as manuscripts spread across England and the Continent. The Sampsons were generous supporters of the

monasteries, and they were included in the community of readers. Clara proved a capable business woman, a devout Christian, and a keen wit. She lived in a society in which noble women were severely restricted, but, despite her move into the gentry, she insisted upon the freedoms allowed the merchant class. When her husband went off to the Hundred Years War, she ably oversaw the running of the estate. She and Robert raised their children to work hard and to ponder deeply.

A bright and curious girl, Anne lived with great vivacity and spiritual longing. She tended toward the visionary as evidenced by the dreams that she shared with her parents. She was a person who wanted to help others. She was drawn to the suffering people of the world. As an adolescent, she asked her parents to allow her to become an anchoress, but her parents refused because the life of an anchoress was so austere. Her parents did not want to lose their singing daughter. Anne acquiesced.

Later, as a teenager, she married William Wyngfield, also from Lynn, with whom she was deeply in love. Her brother Edward was killed as a young man when a horse fell on him. William and Anne inherited the Sampson estate and had three children – Clara, Edward, and William Walter. Clara died in the plague far from Lynn where Anne remained to help care for the poor. Anne was devastated by the loss of her daughter. Slowly, William and Anne rebuilt their lives and their hearts.

In 1355, William went off to serve Edward of Woodstock in the Battle of Poitiers. He was killed in 1368. Anne and the boys continued on amid the turmoil of a changing society. In 1369, the boys too left to serve the king, and Anne then felt the call that she'd heard as a girl. She petitioned the Bishop of Norfolk Henry Despenser to become an anchoress at All Saints Church in Lynn. She was able to show financial independence

and piety and was accepted. Thus, in 1370, she was formally enclosed as an anchoress. Anne chose a life of prayer, contemplation, and community service. For a woman in the fourteenth century with few lifestyle choices, she made a radical claim of freedom in order to pursue an ultimate union with the Divine – not just for herself, but for her whole community.

Anne was a devout practitioner. Her life as an urban recluse was not a dry and lifeless affair but a passionate journey. In the fourteenth century, women's devotional imagery was replete with splendid and detailed images of the sufferings of Christ, highlighting the flow of tears and blood in particular. The descriptive devotional language often portrayed Christ as lover and knight with much sexual innuendo in some cases. Anne lived a disciplined and ordered life of practice, following the Liturgical Hours and the Church calendar. She served the community as an advocate and counselor, particularly as the punitive Poll Taxes created suffering and unrest among the already struggling poor.

Anne had been trained as a scribe when she was a girl. She enjoyed this work tremendously. She wrote and participated in the community of the literate, deciding to write this series of poems in later life. She supported the creation of an English Bible, a radical political position, especially for a person "of" the Church. She wanted to teach people to read so that they could form their own relationships with God rather than relying on the Church whose unbounded greed and divisiveness cast a shadow on its role as divine intermediary. Anne wished for others to experience the intensely personal relationship with God that fueled her life. Being able to read God's Word in English

would help her people, she felt. Although it was dangerous and potentially heretical, she protected one of the many manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bible in her anchor hold.

Anne was not accused of heresy, yet she was questioned by powerful Church leaders, such as Bishop Despenser of Norwich. Over the years, Anne developed as an authentic leader with natural authority, much of which was based on her personal relationship with God. She understood that God is Love. Thus, it was her responsibility to practice love on earth. This practice did not sit well with those whose practice was power and personal aggrandizement. Bishop Dispenser visited Anne when he was in Bishop's Lynn. Many, such as her good friend, William Sawtre, Rector at St Margaret's Church not far from her anchor hold, were accused of heresy for their support of the English Bible. Sawtre was taken away from Lynn, tortured, and tried. The Cell of Little-Ease was his torture chamber. It did not permit him to sit, stand, or lie down. After nineteen days, he recanted believing in a direct relationship with Christ, free of Mother Church. He was burned at the stake nonetheless in 1401, just before Anne died.

Anne Wyngfield died of old age in 1401. She was seventy-four years old, quite ancient by fourteenth-century standards. Anne embodied the passion that she understood and felt in the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realms of human and holy existence. She saw and held the world as sacred space, emanating from and containing her relationship with God. She believed that her life was about service – serving the world as Christ had through sacrifice and commitment.

III. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Anne Wyngfield's life mirrored the century in which she lived. Fourteenth-century England was a time of lush creative and spiritual expression as well as of enormous suffering. Poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, and the Gawain-poet wrote foundational works of literature in English. Christian mystical experience flourished and prompted the development of a well-textured vocabulary of devotion in the vernacular. Because the predominant context of the society was religious, both space and objects within that space were rife with sacred symbolism. The Catholic Church was the frame for the sacred life, but the frame was cracking. Both Church and monarchy fought long and costly wars over spiritual and geographic territories. In 1315, England suffered a devastating famine due to extreme weather conditions and intense cold. In 1349, the Plague decimated almost half of the population. This loss in population led to long-term social shifts, which the reigning powers attempted to control or destroy. For the first time people sensed that they might gain more control of their lives outside the feudal and Church hierarchy, for example by being literate and exploring a direct relationship with God in the vernacular.

Such was the historical setting of Anne Wyngfield, who lived in Bishop's Lynn, Norfolk, in the region of East Anglia. Bishop's Lynn was a busy port town on the Ouse River north of Cambridge and the Fens. Major east-west and north-south roads join at Lynn. Just north, the sea pushes into a bowl-like shape of land called The Wash at the mouth of the Ouse River. Norwich is about fifty miles from Lynn. Lynn was home to four communities of mendicants – the Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians.

Anne shared the century with the writers who gave birth to a body of early English literature. For the first time, English was used as a written language to describe complex feelings and thoughts. Speakers of English became writers of English and readers, or would-be readers, which had enormous social implications. Poets Chaucer and Langland described their societies in the vernacular. Their works were some of the first social commentary in English on English society. Mystics such as Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* also made important written contributions in English. In general, they put forth that the highest human act is union with God. Delivered in English, this message of a direct relationship with God influenced the population.

Within the Church, however, Latin remained the language of God, and God was accessed through the Church. Not everyone agreed with the Church, however. John Wycliffe, a great scholar at Oxford, translated the Bible into English. He and the Lollards who followed his teaching insisted that each person has a right to a personal relationship with God and should be able to access the Holy Word of God in the vernacular. Thus, Wycliffe paved the way for the English Reformation. The Church's reaction to the Wycliffe and Lollard assertion was foreseeable. The Church strongly opposed the diminishment of its own power as brokers of religion.

Some individual priests were supportive of translating the Bible and the Wycliffe view. William Sawtre, Rector of St. Margaret's Church at Lynn, advocated the use of an English Bible. As a result, he was arrested and taken from Lynn. He was tortured for nineteen days in the "Cell of Little-Ease." At the end of nineteen days, he recanted his position but was burned nonetheless. Sawtre was the first to be charged and burned, but

many fell under the suspicion of Bishop Henry Despenser, who ruled from Norwich Cathedral with a sinister fist.

Despite the Church's intention to maintain access and control, the fourteenth century saw a tremendous rise in Christian mystics and visionaries. Aside from the classic canon of English mystics, a plethora of visionaries claimed to have seen Jesus and the Virgin Mary in a variety of visitations. These visions were often passionate portrayals of scenes from the life of Christ with vivid descriptions of flowing blood and tears. The corporeal experience of union was a main visionary focus expressed in the language of lovers. The visionaries were often required to defend themselves from charges of heresy and to prove that the vision was of divine, not demonic, origin.

In 1349, the Black Plague struck England. The first wave that blew in from Asia via Europe was ferocious, cutting the population almost in half. Those who had second homes in remote areas fled the towns and cities. The population did not understand the cause of the pestilence. People thought that the Plague was God's punishment for their sins perhaps or the doing of the Jews who were said to have poisoned the wells or the work of foreigners or lepers.

Great social and economic change occurred as a result of the Plague. These changes set the scene for the Peasant's Revolt in 1381, the first stirring of a social reform movement in England. At this time, England shifted from a sedentary to a mobile society. With so many dead from the Plague, labor was scarce. The historical structure of manorial control over the lives of the changed. Serfs and villeins, who had been tied to manor estates, commanded higher wages and many left their ancestral lands. In Lynn, a large number of laborers took over farms and lands abandoned due to the Plague. The

monarchy tried to impose wage caps and to slow the tide of change by instituting the Sumptuary Laws, designed to regulate and reinforce traditional social hierarchy by restricting clothing, food, labor, and travel, but these were ineffective. In some cases, it was the landowners themselves who raised the labor prices as they bid against one another.

Travel gained enormous appeal, and pilgrimage to holy shrines increased in popularity. On pilgrimage, people of different social strata came into contact in a new way for the first time on the field of devotion. Some of the major sites were Canterbury, which housed the relics of St. Thomas Beckett, and Walsingham, which was a site devoted to the Virgin Mary. Lynn was a stopping place and staging site for pilgrims traveling to Walsingham, arguably the most holy shrine of the Blessed Virgin in the fourteenth century. Pilgrims stopped at Lynn to rest and prepare for the final stages of the pilgrimage, most of which was done barefoot. The monarchy tried to stop the flow of people around the country but had little effect.

The phenomena of pilgrimage made explicit that fact that English society was cohesively Christian with few exceptions. Edward I expelled the Jews from England in 1290. Religion and the possibility of salvation were the over-riding concerns of the entire society. The Church wielded tremendous political power although by the mid-fourteenth century, due to the flagrant abuses of wealth and power and the divisiveness of the Western Schism coupled with the growing notion that people could have a direct relationship with God without the Church facilitating, the firm foothold was beginning to erode. Nonetheless, the ordering of society was based on religion – particularly its relation to time. The world was ordered according to Church time.

Anne Wyngfield experienced the restricted choices of fourteenth century women. She ultimately decided to make her own choice from the few available, and she became an anchoress at All Saint's Church at Lynn. In so doing she joined a long anchoritic lineage stretching back to the Desert Fathers. She stepped out of quotidian life and into a life rich with religious symbolism. From the plants in the garden outside the anchor hold, to the saint's relic upon her altar, to the mass that she could witness in the church from a small window in her cell, everything was steeped with meaning, containing a story to be read. The enclosed garden outside the anchor hold was a tribute to the Virgin Mary with symbolic flowers like the rose without thorns and the violet stood for the Virgin as a humble being without sin.

A community of readers spread across Europe, sharing manuscripts and ideas through a network of traveling religious persons. Both men and women participated in this movable library, and, thus, ideas spread across Europe. This shared communication points to the fact that an anchoress was not buried alive in any sense of the word, but was part of a vibrant international community.

As I just noted, a common portrayal of the anchoress is that of a woman buried alive, proclaimed dead to the world, never to emerge again. The picture that I saw in August 2008 from visits to four actual anchor hold sites in England was quite different. Many anchor holds have been used as vestries for hundreds of years, but inspection of the architectural remnants and changes, makes it apparent that the holds were actually small apartments which allowed access to the inside of the church, to a small garden, to the servants, and to the public. The reality supports the The Ancrene Riwle's description of an apartment with a room for the anchoress, a parlor of sorts for receiving visitors, and a

room for two servants. The apartment (also cell or hold) contained several windows, one between the anchoress and her servants and one facing into the church, usually close to the altar, and one to the outside. No doubt she lived an austere life with few physical comforts and with the strenuous practices of her office. But she was not dead.

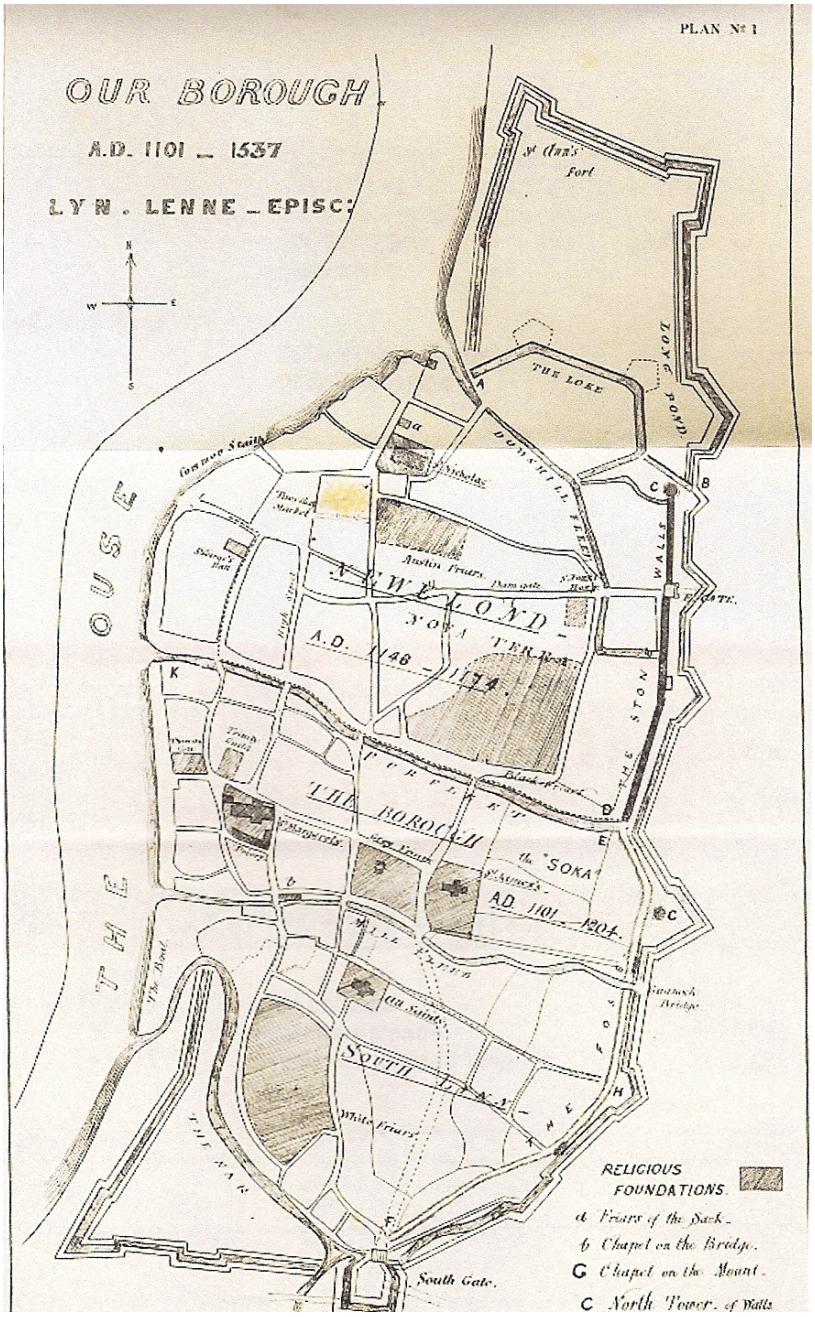
Although part of the Enclosure Ceremony did include the Last Rites, she was not "dead to the world" in the common sense. The ceremony honored the significant shift in the status of the anchoress. She was no longer a simple part of quotidian life, but had chosen to live apart and to serve God and community as her life's work. As Christ had been re-born, so had she.

ANNE WYNGFIELD TIMELINE

1315 Great Famine
1327 Anne born at Lynn
1328 Hundred Year's War begins
1330 William Langland Born
1343 Chaucer Born
1343 Julian of Norwich Born
1343 Marries William Wyngfield
1344 Birth of Edward Wyngfield
1345 Birth of Clara Wyngfield
1347 Birth of William Walter Wyngfield
1348 Plague
1348 Death of Clara Wyngfield and Robert Sampson
1355 Edward III Continues Hundred Years War
William goes to serve the king
1356 Edward of Woodstock victorious at Poitiers
1363 Sumptuary Laws
1368 William Wyngfield killed in battle
1370 Anne Wyngfield seeks enclosure
1371 Anne Wyngfield enclosed
1373 Margery Kempe Born
1377 Death of Edward III
1378 Western Schism begins
1379 Poll Tax
1380 First English Bible Manuscripts
1381 Peasant's Revolt
1383 Crusade of Henry Despenser, Bishop of Norwich
1386 Wycliffe Dies
1399 Despenser Interviews Anne
1400 Chaucer Dies, William Langland Dies
1401 William Sawtre Burned
1401 Anne Dies
1416 Julian of Norwich Dies
1417 Western Schism Ends
1438 Margery Kempe Dies
1453 Hundred's Year War Ends

MAP OF LYNN

King's Lynn, Map of Borough of King's Lynn, 1102-1537. After E.M. Beloe, F.S.A., Our Borough: Our Churches: King's Lynn, Norfolk (Cambridge, 1899).



Apology

I am not a great poet like some of my compatriots. I lack imagination and skill. Still, I love words, the breath of communication, the vibrations of speech, the shapes of words on the page, the scratch of the quill on vellum. My hands are joyful when filled with a book. The thickness of a spine between thumb and fingers, the scrape of turning pages is a fine song for a woman like me, who holds the shapes of words as friends.

When my lines are ill-composed and dull, think kindly of me and indulge me a little. I am not the champion of English verse, but I so want to speak to you, to sift the bits of all these years, to build small containers of memory to offer to you.

I am well-versed in human solitude, sharing time with my Lord. I am well-versed too in the suffering with which we dwell. Even the vessel of our salvation can rot and take on water, failing the faithful in the journey. I look in my heart and see the stain, but that is not all. There is love.

Because I am here, I set letters side-by-side, partner words in a dance. I toss gems in the air so that love will rain down.

Naissance

The stone aperture is a birth canal.
Clouds speed by as in a dream.
I am waking.
Cloud and sun,
billows of mist run round,
transparent.
We are born alone.
I am alone, sing to the mist,
test the stretch of breath,
listen for wings pitched in a minor key.
I well up from within,
chant communion, shimmer,
transgress in starched glints of doubt.
I am a white bird with hollow bones for flight.
I light on the pliant branch of bare faith, agog.
This closed door is an anchor.
I am free.

Flame

When I was a girl
I prayed before bed,
beheld the crucifix
on the opposite wall.
From dark sleep
I opened my eyes.
I lay on my side
face to the wall
back to my sister
late in the night.
The wall breathed
beside me,
a sheet of flame
roaring
as flame roars.
I did not move,
my open body
waited for heat,
the dance of flame
on my heart,
as streaming stars
stare on winter nights
when folk sleep,
the Passion
constellated in fire.

May Day

The morning soared
with the river birds.
I was the first up
and dressed in the
dreaming house.
I shrugged the kirtle
over my shoulders,
snugged the hood
around my face.
I pulled the thick cloak
off the hook.
I strapped on the pattens
to keep my shoes clean
in the spring mud.
I walked to the clearing
where the pole stood tall.
Hopeful smoke
rose from
the center hole
of a little hut.
As I came close,
I heard murmurs and rustles
from inside and stopped,
but they heard my
movement in the field.
Molly and Joe emerged,
steaming bowls in their hands,
laughing in the air,
and asked me in.
As I entered,
I saw the flowers and the ribbons
for the baskets and our hair.
Molly pulled off my hood,
measured my head
in the petaled room.
Which will it be, Miss Anne?
I'll have it ready for you tonight.
I picked pink and white
to anchor a sheer veil,
adorned for the midnight dance.

Thirteen

I set the carding comb on the shelf,
stretched my arms alongside my ears,
raised my eyebrows at Mother
who smiled and nodded her head.
I skipped to the house,
tied the leather bag around my waist,
patting the Psalter.
The scrip over my shoulder,
I loaded bread and hard cheese.
The green kirtle's tippets
swung long and loose
like my uncovered hair,
sprinkled with lavender water.
My pointed leather shoes
were ready for the road,
running toward Lynn
to the barley fields
where I read psalms and sky,
my fingers ink-stained
from my practice as a scribe,
longing for a psalter of their own.
I prayed for Mother
after Father left for the Crusades
She did not laugh
in the morning like before.
May Christ's fire wrap around her
and warm her with His passion.
She was too thin,
worked late into the night,
visited the tenants,
reckoned the figures.

First Kiss

The tall boy waited
in a bowing oak grove
in layered summer light,
nestled between thick roots,
a giant's thighs,
back against the grizzled bark,
chewing sweet grass,
twirling the stem.
I lied to mother,
said poor Emily was sick
and needed a visit.
William expected me.

He heard the twigs snap
and stood to face me.
He took my basket and
headed down the stony path
to the singing river.
We settled on a slate shelf
jutting above the shallow pool.
I took off my slippers and hose,
lifted my skirts,
and slipped my feet in the water,
the basket of wine and biscuits
covered in muslin in the warm sun.
He waded in and slipped on the rocks,
flapping his arms for balance.
He cocked his sun-bleached head,
held my green eyes with his brown ones,
and joggled his eyebrows.
I laughed and splashed my feet.

He tracked the small silent fish,
glinting blue in the light.
He paused above the biggest
and thrust his hands into the pool.
He rose with a cry,
and there was the spotted fish,
flipping out of his hands
in streaming water,
falling back into the pool and away.
He whistled "Sumer is acomen,"
laughed, and fell quiet.

Anne, he said. *Your eyes are green*
like the trees. Your dress is green
like the trees.
He swooped in
and kissed my mouth
quick and light
like catching fish.
My toes
and my calves
and between my legs burned.
My cheeks flame.
I did not look at him.

The sky darkened.
Drops soft as first kisses
fell in the still pool,
spread across the water
like the burning in a girl.
He pulled a cloth from his bag
and draped it over us
on the stone shelf,
I put my head on his shoulder
and fell asleep.

Are you awake, Anne?
I opened my eyes and closed them again.
The rain settled down.
No, I said.
What do you want me to look at? I asked.
The water is reflecting the sky.
He squeezed my hand.
I opened my eyes to the pool,
to a sky entirely new.

Betrothal

William rode in
to visit Father and Mother
on an early morning in June,
before the ringing sky
clouded for the day.
High flying gulls
cried in arcs and fell away.
I watched him come,
fixed and pliant on the bay,
his long thighs relaxed.
He swung off,
handed the reigns to Philip,
the stuttering stable boy.
William hummed low,
like when my head
was on his chest,
listening at dusk
in our grassy dip
in the riverbank,
his arm around my shoulder.
He glanced up at the house,
his face pale.
He coaxed dust from his tunic,
arranged his leggings,
stamped his boots,
wiped his face with a small cloth
and combed his sandy hair with his fingers.
He paused for a drink
from the big wooden spoon,
approached the door
and stepped out of my sight.
I sat reading, vellum pages on the table,
waiting for Mother to call.

Ninth Month

Red flint winked on the road,
and I picked it up,
so full of child it was not easy
to bend and
fold toward the ground.
I tucked the stone
in the pouch at my waist.
The baby kicked, taking my breath.

Nine months before I gasped
on top my husband William.
I rubbed the tight skin with almond oil,
William cupped my belly,
nuzzled my neck and kissed the folds
of my breasts, my nipples dark, wide, round.
The baby moved inside me.
Ten months before
my breasts were small,
my belly flat and smooth.
The midwife said that grace grew
in the room inside me,
walls of flesh.

I held the soft swollen space,
the motion of William
behind me on the bed.
He held my hips,
set my bulging breasts to swinging.
Our baby shifted inside me.
I backed up to him
on my knees, and closed my eyes.
We rocked and breathed,
rode a pearl-crusted carriage.
Oh my Anne, oh my Anne,
he moved in and back,
cupping my belly as the baby swam.
I laughed and growled,
he groaned deep inside me.
Later, the three of us slept.

I went to church with Mother,
knelt before the altar,
grunting and short of breath.
she supported my elbow,

tucked a stray strand of hair,
stroked my cheek.
I looked to Mary, mother of salvation.
She fed us in our suffering
the warm milk of love.
I rubbed the small of my back
and laced my fingers under my belly.

The child big in me,
I waddled and smiled,
crossed the meadow,
eased down in the grass.
In the sun, my belly flexed;
the birth would be soon.

Plague

If you can, imagine
a sky raining daffodils
and daisies one morning,
and the next, the flowers
are dead rats and buboes;
yet the sun rises still
and moonlight casts shadows
as when William and I stretched
in the summer field
the year before.
After the fever's reign,
the moon lit up
bodies stacked in holes
like open mouths,
the earth hungry for
blisters and blood.
Souls fled from the stink,
the entire town
rank, a stiff fear,
each of us
fallen and torn,
an end without rites.
In the nicker of horses,
and in the rutted creak of carts,
the wealthy fled early on,
some of the merchants too,
to remote places in the north
without pustules or public access.
We sent William and the children.
At Lynn, I pressed ginger to the sores
and brewed tinctures to heal,
but nothing stopped the skeleton,
the hiss in the cracks
of our homes and in our beds.
The tears of corpses
muddied the streets,
covered our shoes.
We stumbled pale
or sat in doorways
whispering mercies,
screaming at God,
mumbling revenge,
as we cast bodies into the gullet
of the rapacious earth.

Death

When dying left my town of Lynn
to dance on other shreds of living,
singing did not build the morning fire
or humming fold the linen sheets
nor whistling tend the sheep,
as it was with my people.
The Anglian mist settled in at noon,
muted the purple loose strife's roar.
We heard the wind in the oak leaves.
The lapwing darted with the plover.

My family did not escape--
my Claire was gone.
My white-haired girl,
my peerless pearl,
asleep in my arms,
or high on William's shoulders,
settling clover crowns on her brothers.
Claire died far from Lynn,
far from the tattered girls
I held who moaned and ceased,
dumb with death.
I was a hollow mother;
I begged God to take us back,
to dance again in May,
laughing ribbons in our hair.

The wind blew across the river
where I walked each day;
William asked to walk with me.
I walked alone in meadowsweet,
mute in the howling silence
of emptied arms.
I went to the dank church.
We were a blasted, speechless folk,
we knelt on the carved slate slabs,
we bowed down before our Lord,
we asked forgiveness,
we lit candles for the dead,
we fell asleep on stone,
and woke to pray
that we would sing again.

The Call

The boys rode away,
off to serve Edward of Woodstock,
to fight with France again.
They turned the horses in circles,
spurred them on,
raised dust, whooped and
laughed, glanced at me
choked with tears.
They swooped close to kiss me,
dark cloaks lifting like wings.
They planned for the falcons
during their absence,
brought gifts to the tenants.
Years before, I ran the house with my husband,
managed the rents and the weaving
when we slept wrapped liked sheets,
the babies between us,
Williams's arm steady on my chest.
I sleep alone now.
We are all called.
We listen across time.
These green meadows and sturdy villages,
the miracle plays, the poems sung in the valleys,
the devouring evil of two centuries past,
let us tell of it in English.
The boys reared their horses,
roared away.
The Virgin made Mother,
breasts round with grace, offers us drink.
As the Lord was born of Mary,
a true body, like mine,
the word made flesh,
the blood of his mercy
called me, asked me to serve.

Censing Angels

Why did I marry spirit,
promise my years to stones
where fungi and spiders stretch?

The chalice is filled.
The host is lifted and offered.
Censing angels beat wings;
veils of smoke cross the altar.

The Holy Ghost surrounds the Father.
Mother Mary sits quiet,
her plump son on her lap.

I kneel at the unseen window
of the suspirating cell,
a jawbone in a silver box
on my altar of shifting light.

My people suffer so.
The priest chants
bungled Latin.

Censing angels swirl
in the air; their incense pots sparkle.
My faith is re-born
in wings of smoke and stone.

White Lily

From the mounded snow
she pushes green-bodied,
hungry for spring sky.
She reaches thin-veined arms,
trailing draping fingers
in the blood of Christ,
and mourns a mother's loss.
She rides the sunny arc of day,
dreams the lift and drop
of moon-bleached stone
touching the boundary of her bed.
Her buds swell.

Blood

A mix of nettles, the ash of roses,
and a little red wine calmed
the vigorous flow of blood
flagrant in the anchor hold.
From prayers on high
to the flood down low,
woman is not evil
or soiled
or born of sin.
Blood is the sacrifice.
The world is reborn
year after year,
slippery skinned babies
suckling like drunks
as I suckle at the breast of Christ.

Cold

In the arms of my Lord
I wake, sing prayers
in the dark,
burn in love
on a night so cold,
an embrace of snow
round singing stone.

Pilgrims

I heard the jangling and calling,
the stamping and wrangling,
long before I saw the pilgrims,
passing the fields I roamed as a girl,
grassy scents like gold to me.
On their way to Walsingham
to the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin,
they stopped at Lynn to rest and eat
and care for the sick.
They camped in the churchyard
outside my hold and came to the window.
Anchoress Anne, Anchoress Anne!
A murmur began
in the line of folk,
various and sundry,
gems strung together
to be cleansed in Mary's grace.
I looked at the
plucked foreheads,
and the bent tonsures.
I heard a visionary howl.
A barefoot man stooped,
pocked with sin.
A baby slept slung
to the chest of a young mother.
Please pray for us, they asked,
and I did. I do.
When the pilgrims settled down
in the yard around the church,
the brothers of Black Friars
bustled around them, unspeaking.
I closed the black cloth,
bowed down before my Lord,
tears of his blood in my heart.
May my people be lifted,
like pearls tossed high
or diamonds in gold crowns.
The sweet grass under my body
is an open field.
I laugh with outstretched arms
as Father scoops me up,
puts me on his shoulder,
takes me home.

Matins

In a small walled garden,
peony and ginger,
gromwell and gillyflower
burst under the sun,
inviting me to scent and shine.

I am on my knees on a cold floor.

I enter the arbor like a warm kitchen
or two bodies fitted together.
Mother Mary stands-
The blue cloth of her gown
dark in the folds,
her face framed in white,
her eyes soft, holding me,
her hands open as questions.

I am on my knees on a cold floor.

Around the wall,
wild geranium, meadow cress,
and morning glory sing to Mary.
Lifting their bloom
and sharpening their color,
they press their fragrance
that she should be pleased.
The mound of roses
curls and sparkles
as Mother brings me home.

Wool Gown

This wool gown
is like sheep in fields
of morning sun.
They shake their ears,
drop their heads,
pull soft grass,
silver and wet,
from the sleeping ground.

Where I climbed,
the hawks cried
above the high twisted oak.
My pocket full of book,
I lay along the thick branch,
reached for the psalter,
the smooth cover supple
with eager turning.
The leaves fell open

Mary is afraid.
Gabriel whispers in her ear.
Her face is pale but shines
from the news.
Logos is living in the oak.

I leave the window and the mass,
full of the Host.
I am a guest in this space.
Wool kisses my thin ankles
sheathed in linen.

Leaving the Window

The lilies bowed
at the feet of the
fretting mother.
Golden stamens,
long thick stalks bended to her.
She wrapped around
her fevered bundle,
his eyes too bright.
The lilies nuzzled her dress
as she patted and sang;
her elbow cradled his head,
his cheeks too red.
His mother willed
him to be well,
to run about her skirts,
playing with sticks for the fire.
She offered the child.
I lifted him into the hold.
Her sore eyes
counted fruitless harvests,
reckoned leveling cold,
her husband's sharp slaps
and dry mountings.
You'll tend him, she said.
She pulled the hood
around her face, turning back.
I nodded with the lilies,
left the window with the boy,
and rocked in the damp scent
of bodies in linen and wool,
sweetgrass underfoot.
I brewed St. John's Wort
plucked wild on Midsummer's Eve,
mixed in honey,
and let it cool.
As he drank,
I knelt silent in
the union of gnosis,
dropped lonely pearls on stone,
holding the sleeping boy.
I prayed for mother and son,
Blessed Virgin, heal us.
I held the throated tune of the lily,
the fragrant surety of open heart.

Flint

Crosses line the church
in grey and yellow and red,
flint knapped in circles
of men who share stories
as they work, slapping the stone
with their hammers.
The yard around the church
crunches thick from years
of building and repair.
On my way to the anchor hold
after the Last Rites,
I picked up a piece
and put it in my pocket.
It is now on my altar,
the outside rough,
the inside secret,
smooth and milky,
a frozen sea.

Winter

In February, the sun is weak.
Snow gloves the hold.
I wear all my clothes day and night,
my cloak as well,
and drink hot broth.
At the grey altar I call my Lord.

Heat this freezing woman, Lord,
with the heated arms of your passion.
Heat my soul with faith
so hot that cold and wind don't sting.

Forehead on my clasped, numb hands,
legs needled from kneeling,
shivers running up and down
the length of me,
tears in my eyes,
heart punctured and open.

Father, your son hung naked on the cross
for love of me and had no regrets.
Father, teach me such love
to heat and succor this cold, weeping world.

I called to my Father,
His Son before me
on the blood-soaked ground,
head hung upon his chest,
spikes driven through hands and feet,
flesh ragged and torn beneath his weight
upon the cross, all alone, for me.
A wall of fire rose up behind him,
and in my belly, and in my cheeks
the fire lifted, roared behind
my suffering Christ,
naked hung for love,
no snow or cold to damp the flame,
as when I was a girl,
held in the burning arms of God.

Blazing

Stone darkens
after blazing;
I lie the length of flame,
the length of my frame,
not seeking the cool
white of the lily but blazing,
limpid on the slate floor.
I touch the walls;
my cheeks burn.
The blessed belly of my heat
calls for release,
calls for my Savior.

English Bible

A grey hood of fog
protected the anchor hold.
I knelt at the altar,
my eyes on the crucifix,
the pain and rapture of
the Lord in my heart,
tears pouring as blood
poured from his wounds.
How long I was there,
one with my Lord,
I don't know,
a stillness like pearls
in the hold,
turtle doves in the oaks,
the turtu repeated, the shuffle of wings.
A voice sounded at the squint,
-*Anchoress Anne, it's Thomas*.
Please come to the window.
I pulled the black cloth back,
glanced past him.
He opened a velum wrapper
with nervous hands,
his index finger ink-stained.
I nodded my head,
reached for the Bible,
smiled at Thomas.
-*Are you sure, Anne?*
It might mean death by fire.
I met his red-rimmed eyes,
brought the book to my chest.
Logos illumined was our work
and our earthly trial.
I strapped the book beneath the altar.
-*Go, Thomas. Go. Now we must*
teach the people to read.

Morning

The light is white morning.
I turn from belly to side,
cradle shoulder and hip.
The damp exhale of linen
under wool is the mist
outside thick stone and me.
My Lord is my mother
licking crusted eyelids.

Audience With the Bishop

I was told he would arrive within the week.
On the seventh day of afternoon rain
with rumors of burnings at Norwich,
the open spaces choked in stink,
black cheering and tongue wagging,
Burn the heretic! The fiend will burn!
flame melted flesh into smoke and ash,
and Sawtre was dragged from Lynn
by the hard holy men.
The splashing of horses in the yard,
the sharp shrill voices,
and hurried cluster of footsteps
announced that he was come for me.

My sisters served hot brew and cold biscuits,
and I asked His Eminence to pray with me
to soften the hard questions he asks,
(Do you favor the English Bible?)
to knead the rigid space between us,
(*Do you give communion?*)
to murmur the teaching of our Savior,
(*Are you loyal to seclusion?*)
to kneel at the altar, side by side.

In the heat of my thin hands,
the gift of Christ's anguish
shimmered like the gold threads
in the Bishop's robes.
The Bishop lifted thick, grey fingers
plucked up a biscuit,
and turned it round to study,
sharp eyes squinting in the dim light.
He lowered his hand
tapping the simple fare against the plate,
and stretching the corners of his unsmiling mouth,
sniffed the treasure of a plain wool gown,
draped the weight of a ruby thumb.

Bel-Dame

Edward called at the window today,
Clara Wyngfield new-born in his arms,
a plump daughter, green-eyed like Edward and me.
Her reach ends with fingers,
lips flexed in an O,
ready for a breast
bulging with milk.
Edward offers her to me.
I cup her head in lonely hands,
her back along my forearms.
If I put her to my chest,
she will root for the breast and cry,
feeling tricked.

I am the bel-dame.
Across harvests and slaughters
my well-sucked teats
hang lean and slack under my chemise.
I hold Clara eye to eye,
nuzzling her close,
kiss her nose to nose,
graze cheek on cheek,
and hum the old tune of swollen breasts
as under apple blossoms
on the cloth that William spread,
I reached for Edward to ease
the swell of milk in me
and the baby kneaded the mound,
prompting the flow,
milk spray like stamens
shooting down his throat.
As I hold Clara,
smelling her close,
my breasts vibrate,
my womb contracts,
and my cunt hums,
blessing the girl.

Last Poem

When the lily frees her petals
onto the dark earth of my seventieth year,
I sit and smile at her vigor.
Bloom runs in her, pushes her
to unfold golden throats to the sky,
to stretch open-blanched petals flecked with pink,
like fleet fish on running days of warm stone.
I sit in the garden, still but for breathing,
head and feet bare, a thin old woman in the sun.
The May wind scatters apple blossoms,
white boats riding the air,
a chaotic phalanx
of single-winged angels,
children loosed from a captive home
after days of gasping cold.
I drift in the thrum of bees,
the smallest of birds
indolent with industry,
probiscus intent on honey and wax.

My back to the hold.
I relax in the old chair
whose grain I feel like my skin.
A pair of turtle doves
purrs on the roof, backdrop for wind and bees.
They mate a single time for all the days and nights,
or remain in lonely faith, not choosing again.
She plucks under-feathers, thick and soft,
lines the nest for her eggs, for her fledglings
while her mate pushes air through his throat,
accompanies the bees, ruffles in the petaled wind.

At my waist I wear a small red bag,
my father's gift sixty years ago.
I open the bag,
draw out the flint
with my talons sharp,
like William's falcons'
flexed around the gauntlet.
But mine are stiffly hooked
and do not straighten now.
In my palm I lift the stone relic,
not saints' remains but holy,
spied on the road

when my body grew big,
my belly like the hold,
my babies enclosed as I am.
I listened for their voices.
I pushed them to my arms.
We are all pilgrims,
in wombs and anchor holds,
the gardens in spring,
love at the core.

They took Sawtre two years ago
from Lynn and locked him up.
I slipped him an embroidered cloth
to feed his courage,
a threaded lion sleeping with one
open eye; like Jesus crucified,
the flesh dies but spirit lives.
Sawtre burned in March.
After nineteen days of torture
in a cell not built for human life,
like mine is, where I control the door,
he took back his word.
Burn me instead, I sang.
If I were in that square,
roped upon the pole,
flame leaping at my feet
like foaming dogs in a pack,
I would be curled
deep in the night,
in a cold stone cell,
in a barley field in summer
or astride my muscled husband.
My Lord's call is flame.
I am old and dry.
I ignite in a rush,
kiss my Lord,
and fly.

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