

## The Bardo Books

## ALSO BY GAIL SHER

### PROSE

*Writing the Fire: Yoga and the Art of Making Your Words Come Alive* • 2006

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### POETRY

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*Like a Crane at Night* • 1996

*Kuklos* • 1995

*Cops* • 1988

*Broke Aide* • 1985

*Rouge to Beak Having Me* • 1983

*(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem* • 1982

*From Another Point of View the Woman Seems to be Resting* • 1981

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*Gail Sher*



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*For Brendan*



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*Death*



A man breaks fish. The man mentally smooths its fins so that they don't stick out.

*I'm waiting to be black*, he's saying, but it is food he's uttering. I can see the food grow in his eyes.

Though the black diffusion of fish swims away from the horizon, the fish continue endlessly.

I *see* the fish who is my brother. Its time is pink like mine. We flow in the same yard.

Maybe my mother is a former fish whose throat  
was broken by the man.

I offer her a word. I lift the word to the level of  
my forehead.

*Where's my death?* she is asking. But I think it's the  
clairvoyance of my mother, the instant in her  
dream wandering around her body parts.

Once she saw sun draining down a mountain path,  
like the ridges of a shell, the beauty of a hump on  
death.

*Before my mother is dead, I begin, but you say, No.  
'before' is a word.*

*Words are time. Of is its existence.*

The time of the word, *dead* (the word), hanging from sky, is an activity that she knows from already having been dead.

Time is not skin *in* which body parts are wrapped, but *of* ineffable pink flamingo fluff, later, back in the hotel room.

So there is this dream of a mother somewhere in death. Actually she isn't dead, but merely spaces I shuffle around.

As if a cold steel point is inserted in her with the sense that *this is correct, this is good to insert this inside you.*

*It's the dead person*, she thinks. Like a Harlem of *her* lying on either side of me, but someone says, *No! Go to school*, as if wherever she is *is* center but not the center *of* anything.

Then I go, *Oh, she's dead!* seeing as before, heavy rice-tassels ripening in the fields.

\*

Low sun from above you on lilies, blue flags. She  
walks a hill and the cool sun is prescient she feels.

Like a garden of animals, caribou, birds, rhinoceros  
soaking, so that the sun emerges in them darkly.

*Dusk is like a hen absorbing herself into her chickens,*  
she murmurs.

The wrinkles of the sun swell on your back and I'm  
thinking, *There's the sun*, but it's just one of the five  
poisons.

A man stands on a hill. Light and birds and leaves  
dribble from his fingers.

*Unnnnnn*, he utters. *I am without rivers. I am without  
a sound that can be replicated.*

As how light passes through death, like the skin of  
a bird peeled from its wing.

A young bird honks, honk-honk-honk, as if its  
feathers are a territory, too excavated, almost the  
whole weather.



A body melts in sun. A herd melts. A melted herd is called *downward directness*.

Because what is isolated is stopped. Air's *inside* is caught. *Upward directness* stopped is like movement's absolute inside.

A hat might exist, in this sun, like snow in sun or a flower pressing sun.

*The beauty of the hat is because our world is situated at the heart level of Buddha Immense Ocean Vairochana, a person remarks.*

Sun slips to sea as if air were sea so that within  
slipping there is existence.

Sea is fact. And each sea avuncular like a family  
structure.

I look out to sea and the green ripples wave and a  
little boat drifts like a concept I can forget about.

The splendor of water admits a line of morning  
light, which could be light repelling its own limit or  
light irrespective of her sense of limit.

Somehow a bird slips away from its limits,  
therefore it exists, like a rainbow or a raindrop.

The fusion of a shell touches a current of shells, or  
like the inside of a wave, if I died, it would be the  
same as seeing the wave in a mirror.

If I look at the sun, slowly, imagining it's a  
meadowlark, something is solidified in the tense  
mind of my hand.

A mirror *appears* to take my hand inside, but I  
want my hand to be its own inside.

Which is *of* time, like being *fed* time. Taste is in her neck, the city of her body.

A dead boy leaves a trail in a house toward the bottom of its body.

Like if a peach dies and becomes decipherable, like the inside of my food.

Daylight in a voice or the skin of sea is a separate gesture cordoned off as if for *that* you would have to stand in line.

I am now a person touched by sea, the motion of  
sea inside the horse, harvesting the horse.

*Maybe the artist drew the horse's shell after it was a  
horse.*

*The beauty of a horse is forever, you mutter. The  
scale of a horse inside a man or a man possessed by a  
dzo pulling a blazing cart of fire—the lines of thought  
cannot, like a 'shippei,' be grasped tightly in one's fist.*

*If a horse eats sea, it's sea's endless rocking land, the  
climax of one becoming one again, recycling what has  
never left.*



*Bathing Suit*

A woman begins, is the value of space, like a child  
in a pool, shuffling air in which hard wood is air.

She breathes through wood, taking sharp quick  
breaths. *I want the soft cloth of children*, she's saying.

Her breath has height and the texture of children  
swimming, new swim, out and out, yet clearly  
touching the bottom. *The mind of wood may rest  
itself to completion*, she murmurs.

Wood and air is swimming there, in the space of  
air filtered through a dark forgotten memory.



She is complete air. She tucks herself in air, as in  
the taste of breath, the babysteps of breath.

She is anterior to her air and tries to tie air like a  
ball.

Someone gives me a ball and I tie up the ball. I feel  
certain that I want to tie the ball.

She calls it air because it's there like air, but  
actually it's a kind of stupidity.

Swimming is like a captivity in its body. Every minute in a row I am swimming everywhere and wanting to spend my time swimming swimming swimming.

Because death, too, is an integer. I say 'grass' and it follows me into longevity.

The absence of time, like grass without time, or a lizard in its skin but outside time so that its purity lay in its body.

The brain of the sky snaps an instant to its purity because everything perceived is Buddha  
Vairochana.

My mind vanishes then. Inside its skin it has its  
male and female aspects.

A pool of mind is a passage of light, raw light, the  
membrane between the watery part of light.

A person flows through wood and is the breath of  
a swimmer, like two dead people in love.

Air in a heart is the same air resting there.

\*

A woman walks but she is dead. Her red dress is dead. She is pasted on a page like a paper doll.

There is a handbag and hat that can be separately attached, which is how clothing exists if the person is not living.

She longs for herself in the stray black bonnet, alone, by the sea, soft as a wave.

She takes in sky like a flower sky. *If I see you, then see you as if you were an outline, it's like seeing an avoidance.*

An image of a body has the sweet porous colors of  
body + ideal body, like the image of a bather  
standing under sky where sky, a haze of pink,  
traces itself onto the person's body.

Piercing a bather snugly wrapped in towel,  
piercing straight through her body.

To be a small body on the underside of the color.  
*A housekeeper of color*, someone remarks. (A bird  
swims in time that has already escaped.)

I see the bather's legs, long and clipped, its posture  
of mind rooting repetitious shadows.

The body is a uniform wearing the person. Color leaks out. A painted bather's body is how light looks like this color.

A bather's cap and suit mark that person. Blue is the form of the feeling of her standing within boards shaped like a skeleton of sky.

Boards in sky have a plethora of sky as if it's sky that's being constructed.

The mark is interior, like the film of an angel disengaging from its body, wrapping itself around a life, saying *I am my own angel*.

Opaque light under a bather's knee, reflecting from its knee, because we're through the knee, seeing a miasma of lustrous color.

As if sky *is* knee because of the bather and sky's proximity.

A bardo of knee makes time that is a color. (The interval of a knee where red skips to a color.)

So a painter paints a shape that is an appearance of time's color, like a word appears as object and can *be* the object even in darkened space.

Sky sheds words. The language of its space  
harkens toward direction, as if each object has its  
indigenous essential direction and the painter paints  
*that*.

The interest in a knee wells up from light, like time  
plucked from myriad pools of time that whisper, *I  
am that time*.

Roses are pure gold, their presence sartorial,  
upright. Scent is cast by their shadow.

I sleep myself back to a set point of sky, like a *ration*  
of sky, raising the *mass of doubt*.



*Black*

A black bird's hair flows in the wind as if instinct pursues forward but forward is inside its body.

Because ordinary birds cannot implant as an animating principle the non-direction of breath.

A black bird lifts. Direction, not sensed, but *being* in the time of the bird's body which the *is-ness* of its nest matches.

*I know your breath.* The vibration *now* channels through the black part because black-on-black is how its breath is sheltered.

Sweet water on the bird (the bounteous color of black as a form) dissolves back into its body.

High black, like butterflies leaving imprints, in deference to that, which, after disappearance, is what is left.

The allure is time, direction underneath itself, falling through wind, gushing through a mountain stream.

She stares into a lake. A butterfly drifts on the surface of the water. Its wing is torn and she imagines its life rising briefly above its death before drifting off.

A body dissolves and there is no memory of its  
having been undissolving.

Like a bird whose hair got swallowed of its color.  
It is sizeless, jigsawing red, as if red is the surrogate  
of all possible places.

A man taps a bird on the window of its head. *He  
can dissolve without passing away*, someone says.

*Then* I am in my body but not captive in my body,  
because the reflection of my body as a “high” black  
bird got swallowed up.

I describe an ideal of bird, a content of mind, like  
the sharpening of her hair so that she has little  
*vajras* of hair. *Don't suck your hair*, her mother yells.

An ideal of something ripening, a child's bird near a  
nobleman's. *I want to put my bird near his so it will  
learn to sing with the same beautiful voice*, the child  
explains.

Her body has a sound and each limb I trace around  
my leg. Its breath-imprints paint the space of  
breath-swept thought.

Like crammed flowers in a barrel hold together the  
heart of the person.

*Vajra* is extent, *no hair* the space of being so happy.  
A mother abides and is in favor of her (as at a  
baseball game sort of).

A wind-stroke of abiding, like the earth on its axis,  
which as we find out, doesn't make any difference.

To cultivate the awkward eye, the bird's back eye,  
under its shoulder sleeping (in the bottom way of a  
being's shrill sleep).

The circumference of her sleep makes a limit in her  
body so that she cannot move beyond the elusive  
space of her body.

The *no-hair* of her is exact her, so the mother thinks, *I am not her.*

Then the mother fights. *I am her also. Somewhere, like the bird, is why I keep one near me also.*

*Slow* words are on its belly. If you crawl under the bird, you see script you can decipher.

A lexicon of hair (like a ballet of hair) so that repeatedly we converge on the edge of earth.





*Cow*

A woman paints cows in the passionate arena of  
some easiness in her.

She relaxes into cow and paints a full and complete  
rectangle of color from her own memory.

Like a wheelbarrow of cow (red squares may  
faintly vary according to the grass, which the  
woman doesn't paint).

The woman paints cows but she is actually painting  
her mind waving a *khata* for three seconds at  
death.

Of course there is the painting of a blue girl as if  
the artist's mother were dead.

*I too am in deadland.* That quickening sense, as if  
she were a hall. The animals of a person come out.

Once I was pure. Now the casing of kittens  
unfolds on my bed and my mother's ignorance  
spills out.

If she cooks I am afraid. If she hears I'm in the  
dynasty.

Then a bird swoops down, soaring like a vulture.  
The tail of the bird shines its domino  
white/red/black.

No-cow is cow, cow-time, or the fun of its calf,  
who is ticklish and laughs.

So there's a *double* cow, my dead mother's mind,  
instead of her having her own.

A woman *plans* her mind but quickly pastes  
something over it so it is lost.

The milk-white bird lands on a cow's head. The coils of the bird are like the *value* of wind suddenly.

The cow sits without breath, skin colored like a tree.

The moon could be a boat and the cow jumps over the boat only it is sitting and breathless and there is no water.

An old cow moos from below itself upwards. In the gaps of the cow, because the light of the moon makes the cow REAL.

A brown and white cow grazes on a hill. A  
common cow merging with the hill, as if it were a  
shelf holding all of the hill's karma.

The speed of the hill slows. *Its eyes are just  
beginning*, you proffer.

A dead person becomes permeable. *I'm that  
buttercup! I'm golden in the cow, a clear gold  
buttercup blossoming in the cow's stomach.*

The tenderness of rushes and sweet voice of birds,  
a broom and bell till all sounds fluff them out.

*Hunt*

A songbird steps through sky, absorbs the moor  
into its shadows. Its woolly bottom carries the  
number of nights it has been alive.

The habit of sky moves in its bones. As how a  
verb, energetically transcends its sphere of  
meaning. The *chore* of it is the meaning.

The movement of the land, wet and cold, rubs the  
man's limbs. His gun is slack like an intelligence he  
can't quite muster.

A game bird's flesh in air absorbs the brother air of  
his body. As if the bird is hunting his body and  
*knows* the use of his body.



The head of a bird glows. Is it day or the bird?  
(The motility of its edges seeps through day like  
water.)

Pieces of day. A pigeon moves in its body. *If you  
leave air, there is no air*, someone says.

Sky bathes air like lineage brought from air. *I have  
a pearl between my tail which can't cross over the  
threshold.*

The wing of the bird drains of its flight as if one's  
life is sped up so one can die.

The beauty of a kill hangs in fog, which is what the man is seeking. He is married to kill still living there.

He is in and out of color. Like he could *pet* the color, whose correlate is nativity.

*My stumps have knees but my legs cannot hold them.*  
(Plum light weaves through my idea of the sky's body.)

A bird is brush, its gaze a throb. Its blueblack wings dip and slip.

It feels like decomposition, flesh, rare-pink, a nick  
in the bird's wing.

The hair of the bird, digested by its mind in the  
mind of its karmic murderer.

Whose bardo may be shot up. I *eat* sky, then the  
outcome of its body. (The belly of the bird  
waddles through flowers.)

As if he eats his former mind thus twice-killing the  
bird and the potential of the bird. A moor fowl in  
the tentative sense of *locale*.



*Birth*

You are pock-marked like my birth. The  
wrongdoing of one in a long stream of Indian  
nobles.

As if calamity rode in and no one was there. A war  
of one or no war being so violent.

Like the Church or war-torn hearts afterwards in  
the alley, the animal's eyes, dust to what is feral.

The press of them, like cups, which is the smell of  
my birth in them.

You come like a gust and intimately, where *intimate*  
is my finger.

Touching you, inside a stone, in the hearth of a  
house there.

Your mind is alluvial. If you roam I see the stubble  
of water pierce through you like an arrow.

A bird hums inside its beauty like the inside of a  
sound heard only by its bird.

If a bird arises from time and then the quick shape  
of something yellow, its gorgeousness is there.

A tin of snow is your gift. The idea of immanence,  
a decoy of a time.

The idea moves into other bodies. Cage-birds  
chirp in the bedroom of a sick person, making their  
singing esoteric.

I *count* snow as if one, two, three *live* in the snow,  
are part of the snow's paradisaical logic.





*The Bardo Books*

is set in Minion, a typeface designed by Robert Slimbach in the spirit of the humanist typefaces of fifteenth-century Venice. Minion was originally issued in digital form by Adobe Systems in 1989. In 1991, Slimbach received the Charles Peignot Award from the *Association Typographique Internationale* for excellence in type design.



