

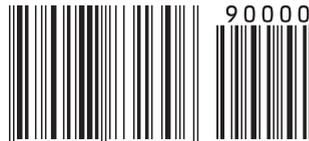
Elm is the third book of poetry in the series
Gail Sher began with *Sunny Day, Spring* (2014) and
Ezekiel (2015). It is the thirty-seventh book of
poetry she has written since 1982.

Elm

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Gail Sher

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Elm

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la

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(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem

From another point of view the woman seems to be resting

Elm

Gail Sher



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for Brendan

My body sleeps in the rainy darkness of space.

It is a quiet rain, falling on the trees, trickling through the leaves.

Drip . . drip drip . . drip drip . . drip drip . . drip.

The sound of drops and wind against the pane is all.

A nighthawk's cry startled her.

As if in response Machie moaned.

Her hair, loose now, lay over one cheek and the palm of her hand over that.

It was her right hand. The long middle finger reached her jaw.

Her other hand fell toward the corner of the bed.

It was a child's hand.

“Take me to bed.” Machie had said it first.

The warmth of her, undeveloped, a little skittish, had been unlike the smooth, clean-burning warmth of the woman she was now.

Her dark places were warm.

Sometimes even now . . .

She could be sixteen any minute.

“Can I know you? Will you live?”

Once she'd seen a picture of very young Machie in roller skates laughing, arm slung around a boy.

But her eyes had looked old. Her laughter somehow stilted.

Living old, a child lives out her oldness so that when she comes of age she has the knowledge to be young originally.

A scar on Machie's shoulder took the shape of violets.

Despite the scar the shoulder was young and fresh.

Might it be that the scar, the result of her experience,
richened the flavor of Machie's innocence?

The scent of a baby came to her. It had the close warm
softness of sleep.

A faint wild crying from the violets ebbed and rose, ebbed
and rose.

The piquant odor of blood, Machie's menstrual blood, rose from the depths of her slumber.

The scent was full with the presence of Machie's womanliness.

"It's like blood that wants a baby," Naoko'd once observed, meaning only that it was a rich, good blood.

"Don't say that," Machie'd smarted.

Along with the smell, pungent yet sweet, was the memory of the smell mixed as it was with their past.

“How did you lose your virginity,” Machie’d teased, egging Naoko on with question after question.

She looked so new. The undone braid fanned over her mouth.

It wore an echo that carried time like the condensed feelings of sadness that made the air crack.

“How many women have you kissed?”

Machie had asked and she had asked but they were just sounds to cover the amazement of their passion.

Outside there'd been thrushes singing themselves crazy.

“Let's find a less-musical bird,” Machie had joked, rolling out of bed, pulling on her jeans.

“Okay, let's.” But the neighborhood was transfixed.

“So how many women have you kissed?” insisted Machie in dazed sobriety.

Lying face up with her legs spread wide, bedding pushed down, Machie slept on.

Her head had slid to the far left edge.

Lips pursed, the usually broad mouth seemed almost to form a heart, puckered at the center and totally unlike her.

Her bones were resting. Even her teeth seemed to be resting.

Naoko remembered a night—she and Machie had newly met. Stars were falling and after making love they'd dozed.

She had, she felt, discovered cleanness, cleanness in a woman for the first time.

As she'd lain there in the dark, listening to the stars—
“love itself is cleanness and cleanness love”—it had come to her whole.

Large white specks floated up yet larger and made a background of flowers around Machie.

The memory, like an itch, crept slowly to the fore.

Because of the girl's cleanness, but what sort of cleanness would it be?

She pictured her awkward gait, her long legs when she walked almost getting in her way.

That sunny day with her purse, zigzagging across the sand.

Two yellow butterflies had been playing at her feet.

One skipped to a flower and, resting on a petal, broadly fanned its wings.

It remained very still.

But when she'd reached out a finger, it skittered up and flew toward an elm nervously.

Shortly it came back. Like a yellow leaf it fluttered through the air and landed on some grass a short distance away.

"It's looking for a flower," she'd thought, scooping it up gently.

She could feel its wings, pale as paper, beating against her hand.

“Oh.” It was an “oh” from the past.

Naoko saw the sand slipping back under the water.

The sand was a world. The water was a world. Utterly estranged their lives coalesced.

“The dark night of the sea,” she thought, emphasizing “sea,” seeing how it sat as “soul’s” replacement.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. It was Machie's heart.

The second thump—thump-Thump—was heavier than the first. Like a limp. She hadn't noticed this previously.

Her breath came warmly.

Thump-Thump, thump-Thump, thump-Thump—the sound of her heart's warmth settled deep in her ear.

As if the heart had a life and was speaking out.

The speaking out almost had the quality of breaking out.

“Her heart’s daughter wants to be free”—though it made no sense, the phrase flit through her mind.

“Who is her heart? Where is her heart?”

She was staring at Machie’s heart as if her eyes, if they dug far enough, would hear its warmth, endlessly.

“It’s a dark sound,” she thought, recalling her mother’s breath the winter night she died.

Her skin had turned dark. When her own cold hand had touched her mother’s even colder one, the darkness sank all the way to her toes.

“Kiko. Kiko,” her mother had gasped and in the stale air coming from her mouth Naoko had seen darkness.

She did not remember it now.

What she remembered was the color of purple.

She pressed Machie's hand.

At the stroke of death she had been pressing her mother's in this way.

It hadn't felt like a hand. It had been resting on her throw and she took it up gently, but her mother's hand was somewhere else.

Still she pressed the hand.

“Her darkness had a scent!” The realization shot out.

The rough breath had hit her face and its dark scent smelled like a demand.

She'd turned her head slightly but the breath followed, insistent, exacting, as if her voice were in her breath now.

It was purple and black and she could smell it in her sleep.

But could she? Naoko had tried to see if the smell was there after she awakened.

Like her mother's, her mouth would be slightly open.

Her breath had been thick and full of desire.

Sometimes when Naoko spoke she'd catch even now the scent of her desire.

“Was it even in her hands?”

Afterwards, with a certain sluggish urge, using two fingers of her hand, she had closed her mother’s mouth.

She had almost said “shut”—“shut her mother’s mouth.”

“Closed” in the event would be more correct, but now that she’d made the slip—“shutting her mother’s mouth” and “closing her mother’s mouth” in the moment of her death would not be the same.

Since her mother in dying would, in effect, be shutting her own mouth—“It’s a wonder I felt so determined,” she thought.

But the truth was that neither of them had shut her mouth.

And her hands? She could, she thought, smell desire in her hands.

It was not exactly a color. It was a will to speak, which did have a color but it was its own color, unconnected with her mother.

Naoko would write and the sense would disappear.

Often while thinking she'd put a fist against her mouth, sniffing her fist, which was always sweet-smelling.

“If at death she’d been so impelled to speak, would not that imply that in life . . .”

“Can someone die of frustration of not speaking?”

“Softer, Ko. Speak more softly,” her father had prodded, tamping the air with his hand.

“Lower your voice, Ko.” He’d said it so often that it had become an irritant.

But she had lowered her voice and what had become of the loudness that was lost.

Naoko wondered if the loudness lived on in her hands.

After she died she'd found a photograph of her mother reading.

Near her was a table, a cup and some fresh dahlias blooming. You could tell they were red even through the Polaroid.

The image was out of focus, however. Each object had a shadow, like a ghost of itself lurking behind itself.

As Naoko gazed at the flowers, knowing that dahlias had been her mother's best, a big red drop oozed from one of the petals.

Suddenly, bringing her left arm up, Machie flung it over Naoko's waist.

The hand was just a hand, flabby, lifeless, without feeling.

Naoko set it aside. Who was this person?

Far away, becoming more and more mournful, she saw Machie running.

Not away from her. Not away from anything, but she was running fast.

“Why would I think I know her? I cannot know her. I cannot know the love of her. I cannot know the source or even the person who desires to know the love of her.”

“Impossibility, or seeming impossibility and one's relationship with that, perhaps that, in essence, was the love of her.”

“No.” The word came low.

“No.” It came again, more emphatic but still low.

Naoko searched her face. Strands of hair touched her nose.

“She has died. She has died into me.” The words, she felt, were being delivered to her by Machie.

“Are you cold?” One of Machie’s feet was tucked under the other, seeking heat seemingly.

As if in reply, a cold despondency swept through the room.

A woman’s body floated up. It was lying on a mat stiffly.

Its face was hers but it was a five-year-old face, with brown curly hair and sweet, childlike smile.

The body, however, looked all worn out.

It moved as if to speak, just the head tilting to the side raising its chin slightly.

So much energy withdrew from the face whose expression, under her gaze, seemed to darken.

An image of Machie's lips, blue and cold, ascended disembodied, as if the time to speak had come and they MUST speak, even if they die.

The lips grew larger, and, as she watched, fuller and more voluptuous until, from their place in the sky, they looked down upon her and were directed solely at her.

What entered Naoko was a beam and from within the beam the very essence of Machie.

Naoko thought "essence" because it was, she felt, the thing that had been withheld.

She knew Machie and the poverty of her life, but there had been something in that cool, clear interior void that she hadn't known and wondered even if Machie knew.

The lips were parted.

Saliva had made them wet but the wetness, sticking to the surface, caused the light of them to eclipse.

As the sun fell to the west, the mountain, holding the sky's last red, stood suddenly empty.

It simply existed, undistinguished, barren.

Even the snow, brilliant white under the glare, draped over the peak uniformly and without texture.

The peak itself, having lost the majesty of the sun, seemed, in one quick dive to disappear.

“Hold me the way you used to,” Machie had said, scooting up to her.

Now that they were in bed, both felt tired.

They lay still enjoying the shafts of a very young moon.

“Your hair is the same. Its smell . . . “

“It’s thinner, you know.”

“Let’s not talk.”

Machie without deciding it was letting Naoko lead.

Alive in silence Machie seemed content.

A grin made a line from her ear to her collarbone, sidelining her neck, slender in the light.

Her cheeks glowed softly.

Mind in a deepened state, body, a modicum of peace, might it be performed together with her, to live out her life together with her?

“What are you thinking about, dearest?”

Machie hadn't replied. A knot of meanness had settled in her body which even she didn't understand.

“I'm thinking how bare everything is going to be.”

“I thought you liked this time of year.”

“I do. You asked what I was thinking about.”

Naoko lay still. She too was worried about the trees. They'd looked so pitiful drooping limply in the dry air.

“There's still some green,” she said in a meek voice, but she had to admit they looked decrepit.

“Am I boring?” Machie, having bathed, had come into the living room.

“Boring?”

“I’m sorry. It feels like I’m ignoring you.”

“I’m sorry,” she muttered again, sitting down next to Naoko.

“Let’s just be together today.”

Naoko had been about to speak but refrained for words seemed empty.

Also saying anything, she was afraid she would start to cry.

She had never seen Machie look so pale.

“Perhaps,” she thought, “she will not live.” The possibility however had not saddened her.

As she stared, caressing her mentally, she felt the two of them becoming inseparable.

“Whether or not she lives, I will never leave her.”

“I will go wherever she goes.”

Elm

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