

# *A DISARRAY OF INTIMACIES*



POEMS BY WILLIAM BENTON

DRAWINGS BY JAMES MCGARRELL

## PREFACE

In the summer of 1970, shortly after Elaine and I arrived in Portland, Oregon, where I'd been hired as assistant dean of the Museum Art School, the poet Ken O. Hanson invited us to dinner. We went to his house, an elegant bungalow near Reed College. A large grisaille painting hung in the living room on a wall by itself. When I asked about it, Hanson said, in a voice that implied I shouldn't need to be told, "That's a James McGarrell."

I remember thinking at the time that the painting looked something like a black-and-white reproduction of a Vuillard, only bigger, in which the darks and lights of patterned grays assumed an elevated standing of their own. The narrative tension in the figures was at once ambiguous and keenly particular. The emotional precision of Antonioni's movies came to mind.

As I settled into my job, I discovered that McGarrell's only connection to Portland had been as a visiting artist for one year, at Reed, in 1956. More than a decade later he was still a presence in the art community. We saw his work — and its influence on other artists — in the private collections of colleagues and friends. In my office at the art school I hung a McGarrell lithograph, borrowed from the Portland Art Museum. The image —a woman and a cat in a sunlit interior with a view of Mt. Hood —had the seductive surface activity I'd begun to associate with McGarrell's work. The monochrome grays gave a truer-than-exactitude feel to the content of his pictures. Figures and objects came about through a synthesis of abstract mark making, similar to how thought in a poem was found by words, as much as the other way around.

The following year "The Quincy Inventions," a touring exhibition of paintings, drawings, and lithographs by McGarrell, came to the Portland Art Museum. I wrote a review of the show for *The Oregonian*, the town's main newspaper. The curator at the museum, an old friend of McGarrell's, sent a copy of the review to him in Italy where he was living, introducing us by mail.

In the winter of our third year in Portland, I spent an eight-day hiatus on the Oregon Coast. Mary Beebe, head of the Portland

Center for the Visual Arts and a close friend, arranged for me to stay in her family's beach house. It was a large, two-story frame structure with a lived-in sense of abundance. There were wicker couches wide enough for two people to sleep on, a walk-in fireplace, big country kitchen, and four or five bedrooms upstairs. The house faced the ocean. A path worn through dune grasses led down to the wide empty beach. I bought a week's worth of groceries and set my typewriter up on a table in the living room.

I woke each morning with an extravagant sense of permission and worked off and on throughout the day and night. During the time I was there, I didn't see or talk to another person. It was cold, the beaches empty. At the end of my stay I had a small stack of new poems.

That spring, Robert Duncan came to Portland to give a reading. At the dinner party afterwards, Duncan, gracious and grand in his ponytail and literary cape, asked me to send him copies of some of my poems. He and George Oppen were guest editors for an early issue of the *American Poetry Review*. Their task was to sponsor an emerging poet to be published in the magazine. It turned out that I was the one they chose, based in part on the poems I'd written at the beach house. It was an extraordinary honor. In the early seventies an event like this was life-changing. One of the gates of the great world opened to admit you.

A few weeks after this news, I got a call from Duncan. He said that George Oppen, in a dispute with the editor of the *American Poetry Review*, had retracted my poems because he considered it patronizing that the Review refused to pay for their publication. (Born into affluence, Oppen's first book included a preface by Ezra Pound, whose economics were a moral abacus for many poets in those years.) The tone of Duncan's voice was somber, in sympathy with my disappointment. Then he said, "But remember, Bill, the important thing is that George and I latched on to these poems."

Looking at the poems, nearly fifty years later, it seems all the more astonishing that they did. Yet the event itself offers a glimpse into the poetry world of 1973. Duncan was right on one level; no

matter what I think of the poems today, they have at least the value of literary archeology.

Around this time, Sally Judd, a gallery owner in Portland, proposed publishing a collaboration between McGarrell and me. The poems Oppen had retracted, which at least felt tested, were sent to McGarrell. He liked the idea of doing the book and wrote that his wife Ann, a poet herself, approved of the project.

Elaine and I left Portland at the end of the school year. The unremitting rain, which continued from September to June, played a part in our decision; we both projected powers of renewal on a sunlit future elsewhere. But, also, I was leery of the academic career mapped into our future, if we stayed at the art school. Tenure and a cozy town were the classic formula for a writer to lose an edge, which seemed particularly foreboding to someone as easily tilted as I. We traveled around Mexico for a while, but eventually came back to America and rented a house in Santa Barbara. Later that year, Sally Judd flew down from Portland to show us the drawings McGarrell had done for the book. Their physical reality was as stunning as the quality of the work. McGarrell had never seen Elaine or me; we took it as a sign of the book's destiny that the figures in one of the drawings—a young woman undressing in the middle of a room and a man waiting for her in bed—looked like us.

When Sally Judd brought up the question of finding a printer, I introduced her to Noel Young, whose print shop was located in Santa Barbara. He was the printer for Black Sparrow's books as well as Capra Press, his own imprint. A book of mine, *Eye La View*, was being published in the Capra Chapbook Series. Sally finalized the arrangement with Young before she went back to Portland.

As it happened, Young had never printed an art book and farmed out the job to a colleague. We were sent unbound copies of the actual press run rather than proofs. The texture of the paper was incompatible with the delicate pencil lines of the drawings. Also, a gray pall lay over the images. The printer refused to reprint. Young, caught in the middle, blamed the printer for not sending proofs. Sally Judd considered litigation, but ultimately the project was abandoned, and the book never came out.

McGarrell and I met, in person for the first time, four years later, in 1978, when I opened a gallery in Santa Fe. We've remained close friends ever since. He did the cover drawing for my book *Normal Meanings*. We also collaborated on another book, *Marmalade*, which was published as a limited edition with original intaglio prints, and later, as a trade edition, for which McGarrell did new wash drawings. Over the years, I've written catalog essays for some of his exhibitions.

Why drag this book and its star-crossed poems back into existence? One answer is that in the digital age you can. McGarrell's drawings, without slide documentation, disappeared long ago into private collections. The only record that remained of them was a set of pages from the rejected print run in Santa Barbara, which I'd kept. Scans of those images, with minor editing, created at least passable reproductions of the originals.

## A DISARRAY OF INTIMACIES

They are talking and one  
who is not there is the subject. He says tears.

The others  
speak from their shoulders  
like guns.  
Turnings and stampings  
sit in the thick morning.

And quietly, for a long time after,  
a solemnity grows up  
behind them, like the trees they are passing  
were cutting the moon down.



Not that way, that was not the way, no,  
they have turned, have  
come back, the wind makes  
the leaves white.

There is dancing and a lot of  
confusion. He turns, who  
sat until now at the edge of the crowd turns  
courageously in a march  
through the shouts of laughter. There is a girl  
in white . . .





A song breaks and vanishes.

Another.

Endless, the walking,

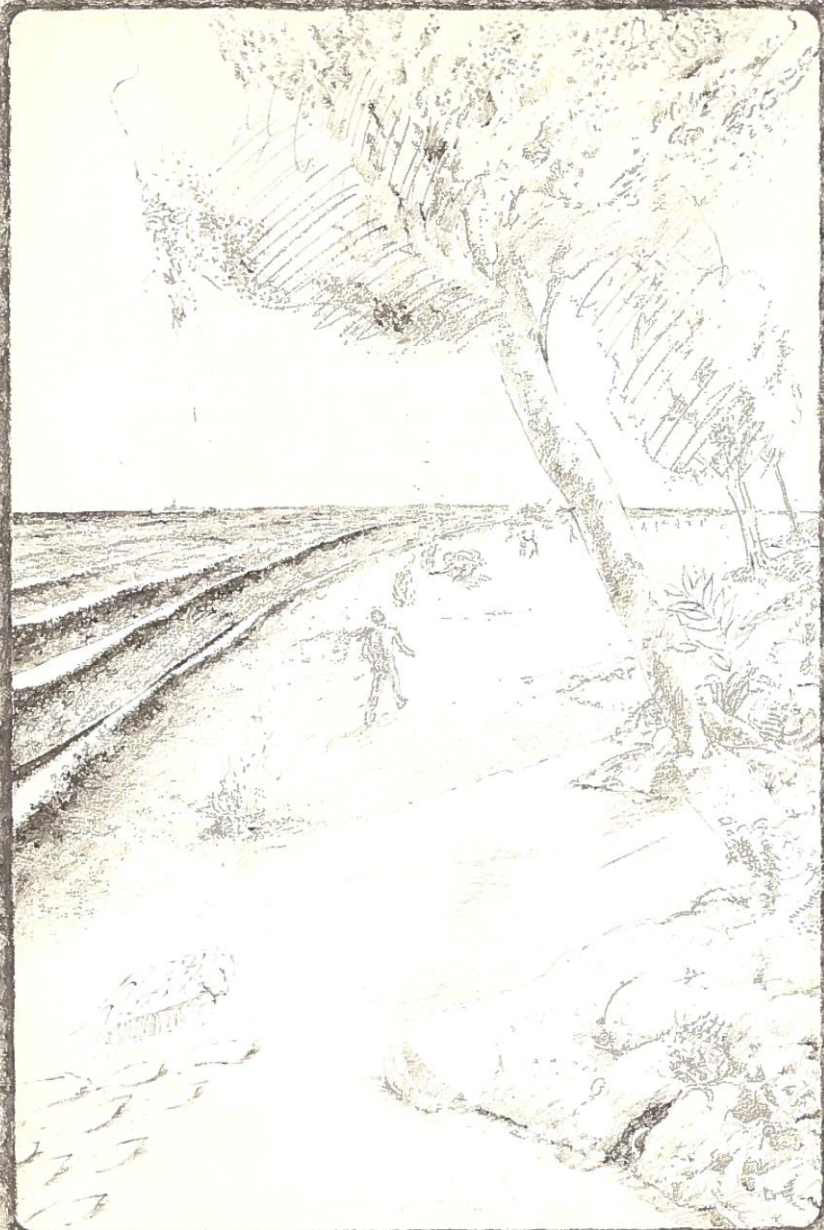
the column winds down a sand beach

to ash-fires

in the distance,

and the song is begun again. For a moment

that his is among the clutter of voices seems  
to ring in the air.



They grow into confused  
almost stalled waves.

The bright words are there.

It has started to rain around the house. You saw.  
It was believable. The running  
as everything blurs.

Slippery off the rocks  
where the grass molds itself, furry and soaked.

We are almost known in that light, turning  
where the sky flattens out, elongating  
clouds.





I want to go clearly to that. I don't. This place

is prior, the startled  
wings faintly

seen, & she waits

surrounded

it seems for

a moment by the aura of

a new species.



Those two. I'll take it by myself. The wet blocks  
give off vapors.

They go  
into the open, and a tiny sea of whitecaps  
shows through the trees. The tall sails  
are there, they compare favorably, fluttering  
to come about.

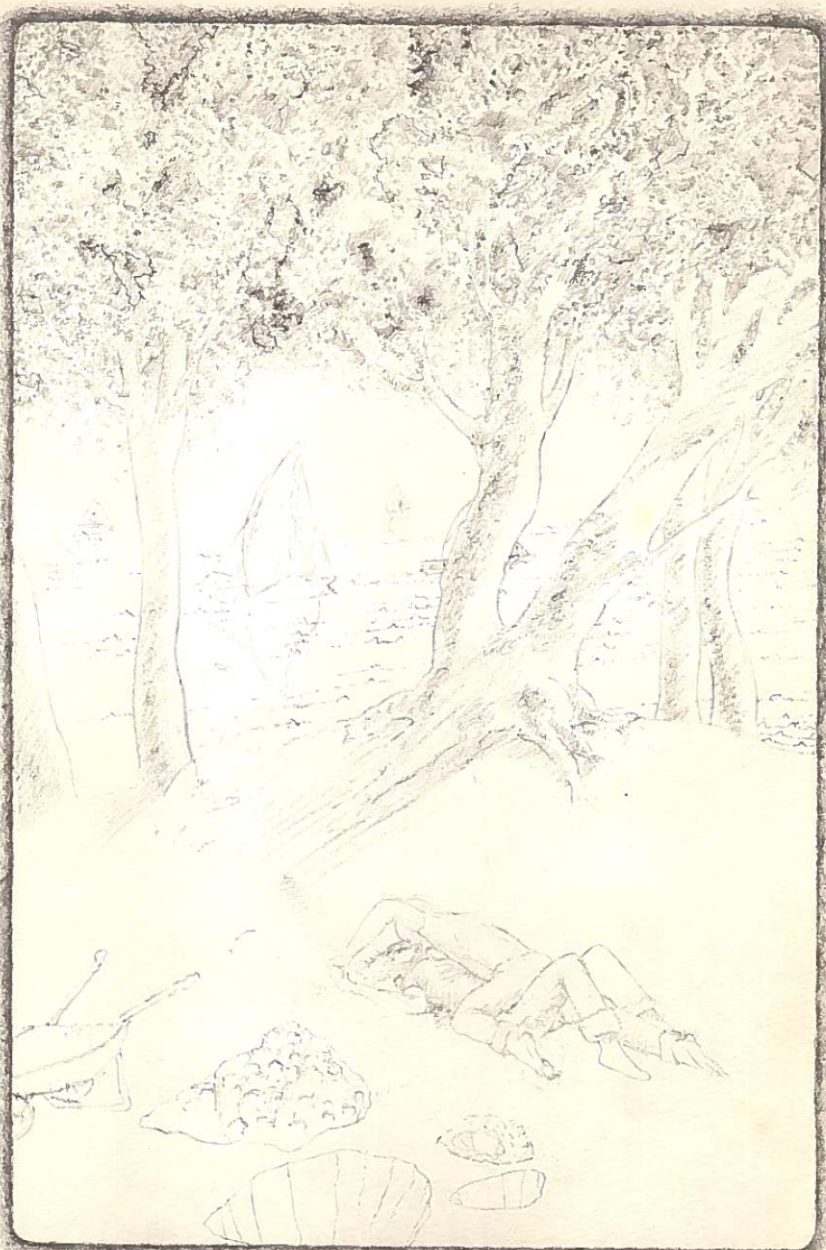
These alien hovels  
of sea-life.

The dune  
is a form absorbed  
in itself.

claws  
link it to Eros.

They have a private life, and are not  
revealed.





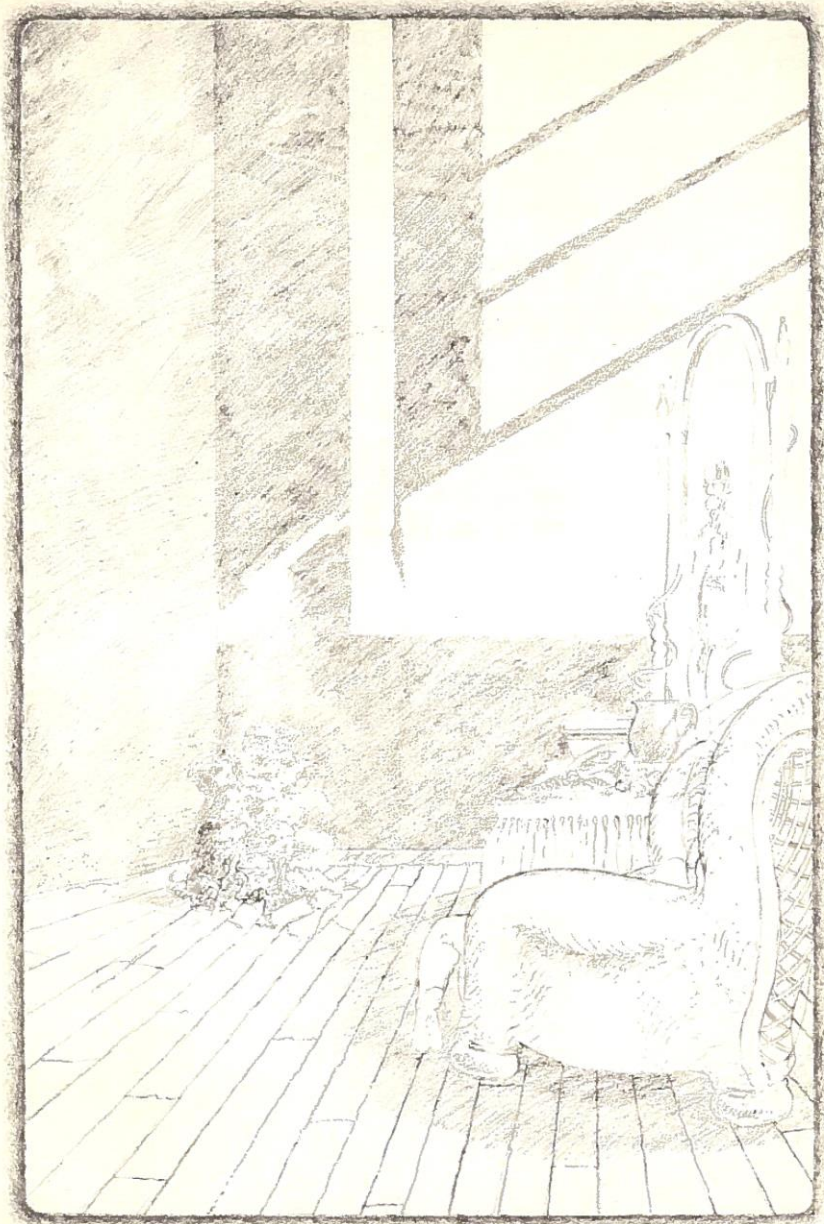
Of myself. On my head. The couch rides over,  
we touch down on one foot,  
the bare principals.

It's like Roquentin.  
There are piles of cigarettes stuck to the dinner plates.  
The world  
has a hard surface and is behind it again.  
You go back to see, squinting  
at the crevices,

the light  
where a blue scaffolding of shadows is raised up,

a held smile,

glued  
to the impressions of loose earth,  
fixed,  
and wrenching the dirt free.



I am aware of all the little motions.

    This solitude,

        washing the dishes

            in the morning. Moon.

Breakfast. Laundry. A horse.

        The footpath

    goes through bleached grass

                where the sea

        wobbles up.

    It gets done with less and less urgency.

Love's wish.

        The odor

of burnt wood,

        seismic realities.

There is less story. Les Storie, watching

her undress in front of the fire,

        her feet

            out of small

velvet boots.

        Milk-white.



I'm a mess again, and she hardly moves through, her life,  
among so many as these women, this woman, whom I  
am always distorting,  
in the room, also,

her place is  
an edge the white  
leaves.

I don't want  
having it stop slowly  
and omniscient,  
breaking from recognition. Flowers  
near the window, that relief, to write  
that.

I have this life  
of that one, the approach clear, a strict  
code, Elaine is  
beautiful.





I walk in right away and make it.

Let's see,  
the rest is that hawklike atmosphere  
and curious window

it stops there

in the wave

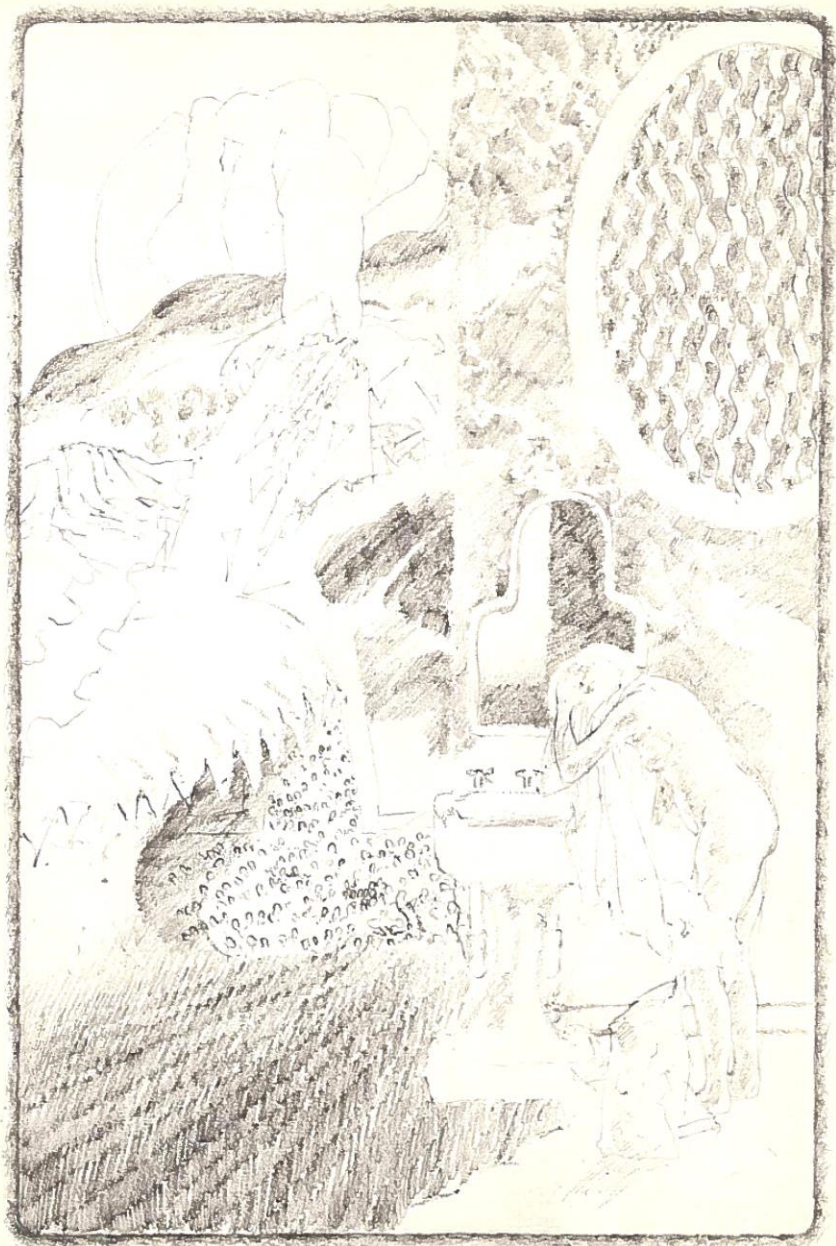
or the sun goes through it  
and a wave lifts, light green.

He wants the perfect immunity.

These edges  
connect, finely tethered,  
and he tests its strength,  
a gold chain that winds back  
tied to the branches.

Out of the beautiful past  
the white sea, half dark.





Sweet weepy town. The hills drift, wild  
strawberries.

I'm no  
help, the routine appears.

He is pawing the air

the cleft hooves

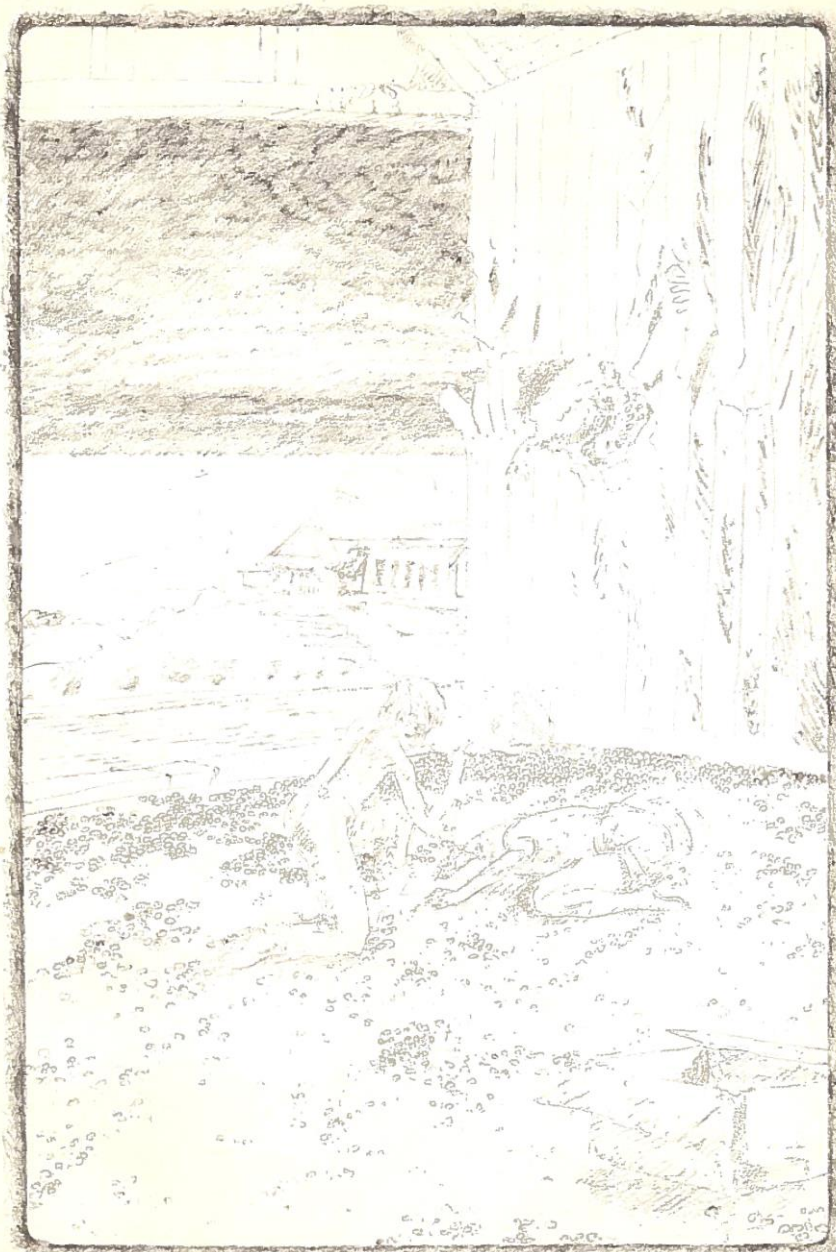
are silver

a spired head.

                    Their legs  
show, hers are slight, his hollow, it nuzzles  
                    the earth they are under  
a mantle of stars in the heavens, she says aw.

And he is brought back,  
                    the white body, folded  
upon itself.

New, it's so far.



*For Mary Beebe, James McGarrell  
& in memory Sally Judd*

*December 2019*