

The Copper Pheasant  
Ceases Its Call

ALSO BY GAIL SHER

Prose

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

*The Intuitive Writer: Listening to Your Own Voice* • 2002

*One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers* • 1999

*From a Baker's Kitchen* • 1984/2004

Poetry

*East Wind Melts the Ice* • 2007

*Watching Slow Flowers* • 2006

*DOHĀ* • 2005

*RAGA* • 2004

*Once There Was Grass* • 2004

*redwind daylong daylong* • 2004

*Birds of Celtic Twilight: A Novel in Verse* • 2004

*Look at That Dog All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms* • 2002

*Moon of the Swaying Buds* • 2002

*Lines: The Life of a Laysan Albatross* • 2000

*Fifty Jigsawed Bones* • 1999

*Saffron Wings* • 1998

*One bug . . . one mouth . . . snap!* • 1997

*Marginalia* • 1997

*La* • 1997

*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

# The Copper Pheasant Ceases Its Call

*Gail Sher*



NIGHT CRANE PRESS

2007

Copyright 2007, Gail Sher

All rights reserved.

Night Crane Press  
1500 Park Avenue, Suite 435  
Emeryville, California 94608

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted  
in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical,  
including photocopy, recording, or any information storage  
and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the  
copyright owner and the publisher.

ISBN: 0-9726115-8-4

*For Brendan*



THE COPPER PHEASANT  
CEASES ITS CALL



“As we approach spring.” That was all he had said, but inside her, something softened.

The memory in her body, was it of air, a certain featheriness, like the way dust doesn't quite fall but frolics.

Or of being awake early, say three or four hours before light. An intense thing happens and then one proceeds into one's normal day with that intense thing hidden.

Others may sense that this person is somehow different, but they wouldn't be able to say why or even what exactly is different. It dawns on both the person and other people encountering her, gradually.

She gazed at the grass, its green breath cheerful.  
From its roots she heard the sea, frothy waves  
settling on sand, matted and pressed by the  
pounding of Christ centuries.

*Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.* Her grandmother's fist  
on the brown and yellow oilcloth. Flecks of crust like  
eggy pellets of bark.

Were His feet muddy? They tasted of honey. Knees  
to earth – the red brown earth – to genuflect, to  
seize His gaze driving like a knife through the hole  
in her belly. She plucked a blade of grass, sucking  
sweet life from its tender slenderness.

Sweet water dribbled down the side of her chin  
before it stopped, frozen.

Before her child wakes, a mother mentally makes the shift.

Her shadow is attuned to the subtle movement of his body. When his shadow sleeps, hers pauses. The stirring of his shadow, like a soft admonishing hand, presses against her stillpoints. Space opens in her skull between two waves where she prepares to cradle her son's awakesness.

*Cheep. Cheep.* She woke to the smell of spring.

A surge of joy – just before the longing for her mother (green and foreign) had vanished in the gush.

*And so my mother ceased to be my mother. She was something else.*

Her mother had been fond of telling stories about her past. There'd been one of a child who'd fed a squirrel. Only to be bitten. But the squirrel refused to release the child's hand. By the time the little girl (might it have been her mother?) dragged herself home (squirrel hanging from her bloody and dismembered fingers) her psyche had been ravaged.

“I know someone who sews twelve hours a day,” she'd added randomly. “She sews on paper. She'd sew on wood if she could. She'd sew and have a baby!”

She looked more closely at the hill, its jaundiced mud, sickly, too shiny, moments from sliding away from itself. “One more drop could be disaster,” she thought, peering again at the sky.

“There it is. There’s the rain.” Her upstairs neighbor banged his window shut.

A few drops splashed against the glass. The weatherman said rain and here it was.

One bird chirped. A moan almost.

One drop and then another grazed her arm. She was leaning over the edge of her porch, admiring a row of lilies. None of them were blooming, but the lively green of their straight-backed leaves was splendid against the russet mulch.

To gaze at the hill or shut her eyes and just quietly enjoy the afternoon sun, which suddenly spread, lifted its face and blazed brightly.

Shrill wind sounding like a cat. Sheer curtains fluttered, then poofed crazily.

A moil of birds, peeping, screeching. Sun spilled through the vines.

Soft breeze. Mudflats (bowls of mudflats).

A sandstone bird bath, overgrown and mossy,  
yawned a shallow yawn in the yard's pudgy middle.

Screeching chicks, gaping at the crop. Head back.  
Eyes shut. A few sprigs of white cushioning the  
gnarls in their quick branches.

How many ducks in a row, beneath, in the lake's  
sedge?

**Mist alive, so fresh on the green lawn.** First light as  
it spread across the patio.

Mountains humped the sky, a little like cows all  
brown and white and loafing.

Deer nibbled strawberries toward the echo of day-  
laborers.

Light was just beginning to glaze her room as she woke from an especially deep sleep. She lay still with her eyes open.

A full moon dripped through gray-green dawn.

Then the odd leftovers of her dream sprawled under sea, though the sea was housed. Mansions, rolling hills, flowered valleys, slopes. Water-full rooms themselves held aquariums – massive coral fish with lacey serene bodies.

And now that the flowers were falling, the black earth in the grove's shadow looked white.

So that when she passed through the garden, hours before dawn, the vista was ghostlike.

Four small, softly curved petals flared out on the sod.

On the fourth floor was a sunny room with plants and women sleeping. On sofas, on rugs, in armchairs, in hammocks. The center provided this space explicitly for rest. Women are tired, they'd said.

A cool breeze sloughed its way through the late August afternoon. It limped along. Not quite ready.

A young breeze. Her young nasturtiums likewise were toppling. Once they had sprouted, they shot up strong, a little belligerent, jockeying their way toward the sun. First one fell. Now the other six were cowing.

Skinny stems, snappy petals, straggling over the clay pot's edge.

A deer and then its children – one, two graceful  
bones out on the glade.

The smallest sucked a leaf. (The wandering mother  
in a moment of reprieve as her offspring fed.)

Chewing, nodding, trying a drier bunch, a harder-  
to-reach, greener bunch.

A memory arose of her mother's childlike body,  
sweet, like a roasted potato.

Creamy sand and ocean-blue water pressed against  
the sky. So that it too seemed vigorous, its blue  
weighty. Pulsing and sharp.

Hot noon air, singed and crackled, alive over the sea-  
edge. Dusty afternoon turned to limpid night. The  
mote of the firefly's silky, neon, beep-beam-beep.

The limb of a palm elbowing restful gray. "Hey you!"  
(A young thing with young gestures.)

Peeling, cackling nuts, bark. Fronds on top fan the  
liquid earth. Lamp posts strut noble and tall like a  
black tap dancer.

Soft soft shuffle beneath caged birds. The patio's soft lights reflecting the pool's blue shadows.

*An announcer in his ocean voice, megaphoned astride the savannah.*

One of the heads was opening. Sure enough it was blue. Or sort of blue-violet.

A cigarette lighter, for example, swaggered in glowing curvatures as its black engraved initials danced hoola-like through the smoke-filled tropical air.

Rich night air, liquid air, but like champagne, bubbly  
and elegant, not chintzy like soda.

It would become morning air soon.

The memory of that other air, close-to-morning, but  
not as close.

That other air had stars. So numerous their ring  
echoed through the mountain valley. Indeed you  
could smell them. They lay at your feet throbbing.

A single bird. *Cheep cheep cheep*. Pale-gray-rose filtered through the sky.

Bang! A window slammed shut.

Her pleasant dream resurged in pleasantness. Woodwinds, violas, bassoons . . . slipping back . . . toward the color of hay. Her urge toward this color, its precise, crisp (nay brittle) mix of yellow, brown, green.

Dawn's pale light eased over the carpet. Bitter air blew across the hill, puffed the faded jacket of an old Chinese woman. She looked sad. And terribly foreign. Black cap, bangs, but too old for bangs. Too heavy. Her lumbered stride.

A dove's moan lingered, beyond the eaves, above the shrieks of coarser appetites. The buzzing she'd been feeling in the center of her forehead, for days unassailable, now gone.

Her dark eyes scanned the horizon, the sea and the bare trunks of trees.

Stout birds swinging low, then soaring upwards in the navy light.

Rust, dove-gray or violet-dawn-gray matted then  
needle-scratched. She imagined the canvas. Its depth  
and texture of color.

A chasm, a face, nostrils, mouth, a fluffy mane of gray-white hair. A festoon of green wild things but not water. Nothing pure and fresh in this mildewed cement.

The color of feathers (a pheasant's or robin's)—  
vibrations of spray piled on to ease.

Breath was protection sweeping out the gross nature  
(a person's inspiration, another form of breathing).  
Play was breathing.

*Wild white fragrant Pinks flowering richly over the  
meadow.*

That morning she'd laid on the barn's lean-to, red  
maple fingers (like a priest's), chattering water,  
prayer.

*She plucked the feet from the pungent broth (slurped  
and swallowed its Christlike slenderness). Their  
crunch and thin filmy marrow.*

“Are they larks?” Watching them careen the stormy  
sky, alabaster, hollow.

Pink moon covered her otherwise blackened floor.

The tawny hill. Such was its flank, the creek mostly dried grass.

Rapacious thornless blackberry vines threatened the willows along the creek.

Not even birds. They bathe in the rain, in the skinny moon, in skylights, eaves, rooftops or the tippy-tops of trees.

Birds madly roosting. Their clamor. In its abrupt absence, her mother's lazy voice saying, "I don't know" in answer to a question about her husband's illness.

Her mother, usually an alert, extremely clever woman, over matters that concerned the health of the person about whom she says "When he goes, I go" suddenly went dumb.

"I don't know," she drawled at any query more complicated than the time and place of his surgery. She was not even sure what organ was being operated on.

The peculiar quality of her "I don't know," a sleepy yawn – the tone conveying, "It's too early to tell" superimposed on "Don't rush me. Come back later."

A lean woman in shabby clothing, though her eyes (steady) carried – not joy exactly, but hope. Wisps of white bloused her frail, gray, waist-length braids. One, bound with a rubber band, flopped over the other, tied in green elastic.

A cruel wind blew. (The air was filled with the scent of plants.)

Gray fungus, like drooping beards, and creepers recondite in the native forest.

A distant shower, its blue slanting streak, far across the horizon.

Mist covered the sky set with hard stars. The day was darkening in green shades.

The characters in her book (old lovers who had not seen each other for years) were spending a night at an inn. The room they had been assigned had a grove in its garden that shaded an entire wall.

Neither of them knew the names of the trees, but gazing at the expansive trunks jutting up against their verandah helped them relax.

She imagined the two of them sprawled out in their kimonos, enjoying . . . she pictured redwoods. Gnarly limbs with soft reddish bark.

*Sweet soft night descended with the roses. Moist air, rose-blossomed and thorny. Soft thorns. Yes. She pulled the peach-colored flower closer, thumbing the thorns, letting them jab her calluses. The vine concealed crossed stems of buds that released their fragrances one at a time.*

A sheen of rain fell. One bird sang, lowing gently, regretting the oncoming night. Of course it was her own regret she'd heard into the bird. She watched a boy from across the lake walk from his swing to his back porch listlessly.

She continued to watch the swing which (was it an evening breeze) kept lazily rocking. Slowly slowly, ever so mildly back and forth, the little wooden seat. Its ropes were knotted, suspended from a tree.

The swing jostled (twisted in a sudden gust).

Night was coming fast. A red leaf landed in its center, arousing her. Through the darkness she could see the leaf's auburn, yellow, gold.

Its stem stabbed the air, poking upwards, bullying the neighing breeze.

She couldn't stop looking, peering through the chill black night. No stars. Not even clouds to absorb a shred of the day's aftermath. Pitch dark in a weary wind, even the dew, settled, tired, collapsed.

**The rain had stopped.** She plumped her pillows and lay back. Not a shred of light in the sky.

A wave of anxiety pulsed through her body, then lodged in her abdomen and inner arms. It felt like a short, its after-buzz a limp shivering splattering through her being.

*A coyote's throat curved and taut beside the cactus.*

Once she'd found a pelt. It was warm as if a hunter had recently skinned it.

The fur had been cream-colored with beautiful brown spots. Strange. She had pictured coyotes as gray, light wolf-gray.

Whiskers was the word that came to mind. (His gray and white scratchy-looking hair.)

So that her impression was of rather a gruff person.

Yet examining his collection of carved rosewood animals – turtle, snake, rhinoceros, porpoise, rabbit, albatross – buttery and gleaming – something clean filled her chest.

Even his wife, Scandinavian probably, seemed wholesome (retained some scent of wholesomeness).

“A sun cup,” said the writer, “is in the evening-primrose family. Sprawled flat on the ground in a rosette of leaves, it is among the earliest spring flowers.”

She had been reading the bulletin while standing in a post office line. A monarch, a swallowtail, a bumblebee and big black beetle hovered around a feather.

“Only on the coast from southwest Oregon to San Luis Obispo, and only where soil, sun and moisture mix in perfect sun-cup combination has this flower been able to survive,” the botanist continued. “While its yellow petals glow, its seeds lie buried in a sturdy capsule.”

The air was cold and the sun, crystal clear on the sparkling grass.

She stepped out on the porch. The cold was steady, reliable. A strong thing.

A rushing sound (not rain) wandered through the trees. It ran along the ground, in the shrubs and tilted reeds. It rustled and rattled just above the earth.

The hill itself looked drier, harder. Overhead, a bleak wind lashed.

A pair of doves waddled about.

Shriveled berries from her neighbor's hollies rolled  
around the drive.

One sharp nerve (its potency and excess) panting its  
way over two front lawns.

A train whizzed by. A stroke of sun, floundering,  
anchorless, seemed out of place in the placid winter.

Plain patched with snow (flower-filled meadows,  
thickets and tree-lined riparian corridors).

A virile pinaceous scent, sodden after last night's  
storm

A flock of birds in the late February sky. She had  
been gazing out at the bushes. Porcelain pupils in  
pre-dusk shadows.

A Monarch, huge and alone, flapped around a tree.

*Bunched snow in winter would sit (softly) composed.  
Did not buckle but melted under fair skies.*

Restless wings, vomiting themselves out of existence.

Like satin to a jittery child (holding a piece in its  
little sleeping fist), so the end-of-winter sky with its  
soft, sweet middle. Even for the birds. They bumped  
heads.

Then sun. Color and smell faded from the hill. The meadow lay wasted. The weather, a negation of weather.

Nestled in her robe, scrunching her feet in a woolen throw.

Small birds enter a nightly torpor. Some shiver. Some shiver continuously. Some (goldfinches, redpolls) grow more feathers (fluff them out).

“Here,” it said. Here she felt none of that.

Spasms of chimes in a powdery wind. The smack of sheet on an upstairs banister whipped then twirled into an argument with itself.

Daylight vanished in a swirl of brumous clouds. Through her stained-glass window she watched them cruise, screening the stars, like brooding ghosts.

Marsh grass dozed.

Sky scudded past. Exhaustion from the day drained with the light and she fell asleep.

So soundly. So soundly she dropped into the pit of silence. (A carrion call raged, unspooling her mind.)

Gulls. Their raucous laugh unheard though high through the crazy chill. She slept and dreamed of seabirds, rising, falling, mingling in the broken shards of crashing sky-hewn water. A tooled container, half-sunken near a sandbar, bobbed its oily spillage. A sour smell, a soft mysterious rattling, awakened her.

Snow fell softly on the dark curly road. She stood in the doorway, pressed between the room's warm glow and the street's empty whiteness. Flanked by sleep, by the still-silent night, she slipped between the stars and sheer hard glass like the first person on earth.

Slip-skating a delicate swoop down the road's center.

Silence warmed. Powdery snow splayed across the world (air-brushing the world) as if to obliterate the previous canvas.

She grabbed the sky and shook it.

Smudges of cinders. One with a little boot.

A lamp draws to it night. A collection of lamps,  
night and the smells of night-pushing-toward-  
morning, light and morning-sounds already pulsing.  
Making things.

Snails and roots. The dug earth exuding, breathing a  
calliope of themselves.

Gushy mud. Slobbery and clay-filled. Had oozed  
inside, soiling her.

Being sleeping in it. Upright, though not at first.  
Upright walking and at first seeming-to-be.



*The Copper Pheasant Ceases Its Call*

was set in Minion, a typeface  
designed by Robert Slimbach  
and first issued in digital  
form by Adobe Systems,  
Mountain View, California,  
in 1989.

Typesetting & production:  
Claudia Smelser.  
Printing & binding:  
Lightning Source, Inc.



