

A Welcome Shore

Also by the author:

*The Roar on the Other Side*  
*A Guide for Student Poets*

*Sketches of Home*

*What a Light Thing, This Stone*

*Weather of the House*

A WELCOME  
**SHORE**



*Suzanne Underwood*

**RHODES**

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*To Wayne,  
my true love*

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	9
Foreword	11

## 1

### SHORELINE

A Glimpse	15
Cold, Soaking Skin	17
Mountains and Sea	19
Touches	21
Signs and Wonders	23
Morning Shower	27
New Address	29
First Snow	31
Notes on Today	33
Ocean Calendar	35
Without the Cherry	37
Tangier, Virginia	39

## 2

### TRIBUTARIES

Shenandoah Dreams	47
Mr. Boh and Bela	51
House on Hatemonger Hill	53
The Third Day of Spring	55

A WELCOME SHORE

Scrapbook Pages	57
The Heart Has Its Hunger	63

3

CHANNELS

Wonderful Hand	69
Aunt Claire	71
Watermarks	73
Her Grandmother Lillian's Gown	75
No More Rabbits	77
Johnny	79
O. D. and Ruth	83
All That Jazz	87

4

TIDEPOOLS

The Soul's Blood	91
Broken Teeth	93
Lethal Shadow	95
Tangy Chermoula	97
URL-Y to Bed	99
Where Music Comes From	101
Glass Music	103
Waxwings	105
Frown	109
Mermaid's Tears	111
Heart Hollow	113
A Royal Season Mixed with Myrrh	115

## FOREWORD

It is an ongoing wonder when a writer is able to infuse her prose with such poetic quality and tenderness that each piece becomes a poem in itself. Suzanne Rhodes has this magical facility of seeing to the heart of things, so that in her brief narratives each little hook for the imagination is a small pixel that adds to the whole and, in an observation, makes of complexity a simplicity that sticks in one's mind. She paints color and texture with words so that it all adds up to such a truth that I wonder why I hadn't come to the same conclusion on my own, in a similar circumstance.

But of course, no circumstance is identical to any other. Even the following day—same time, same place—the wind will have risen or the clouds have cleared, or a tight bud has just unfolded.

To retain the precision of the moment, one has to be there to experience it. Suzanne is a friend who takes my hand and says “Look!” or “Listen!” or just “Stay here with me while the meaning of this beauty unfolds.” It's in that particularity and specificity of Rhodes' seeing and speaking that a comparison with Mary Oliver's writing becomes consistent in my mind. Both have eyes wide open for beauty and the significance of earthy things like shorelines and sedges, shells and what Suzanne calls “the slow simmer of time.”



FOREWORD

Her subjects include things like the miracle of the human hand, the tang of a marinade, how improvisational prayer is, a horse-shoe crab, or the weight of wetness on a morning tent. And much, much more—each sample a small slice of a life lived well, in which we are invited to join, powerfully moved, weeping or rejoicing with the writer.

LUCI SHAW  
Bellingham, Washington

1

SHORELINE



## A GLIMPSE

It's 8 a.m., and I'm driving to work in my aging Buick station wagon, feeling displaced among the faceless cars. Before this life on the expressway, I lived in a town with a view of mountains, with neighbors of many years, with time to walk on land. Now I live close to an ocean that calls to my depths, but I spend hours on asphalt traveling to and from work and driving my daughter, Emily, all over creation. It's disheartening, the endless blocks of oversized stores, the blazing traffic. Everything is altered following a divorce. Moving away from all my connections, I live in a smothering fog. I picture myself as a goat in a fairy tale, caught in a sack.

Something catches my eye—a glint of water by the road. Like a secret within the marsh grass stands an egret, holding its curve against the deafening rush of time.

• • •

It's Wednesday and I've called in sick. I struggle to get out of bed. Can't eat or sleep. Objects make me nauseous—the door knob, the clock. The floor frightens me with its sloping and shining. Fragments and images swim through my head—Gregor the beetle stuck on his back, waving his extremities; Zelda Fitzgerald

painting her strangled flowers. I spend the day crying. I tell God over and over what I tell him. I call my sister. She orders me to see a doctor, fearing I'm close to a breakdown. I obey. The doctor prescribes medicine. Over time I find my foothold.

• • •

I have a new friend named Wayne who rides to the beach with me. I like his dry humor, Texas accent, crinkly eyebrows. We ride our bikes past the fishing pier to the inlet at the boardwalk's end, then all the way to the other end where the hotels stop and the homes begin. I feel the ground beneath the wheels. I smell the salt-washed air. I like glancing back and seeing he is there in his red fleece and cap, with the sky and sea as background. It's all I need, a glimpse, a momentary shelter.

## COLD, SOAKING SKIN

We got to the site at dark and I forgot how to pitch my tent and could barely see but I heard the ocean across the dunes and knew we were between water and woods. We can do this, I told her, as we fiddled with cords and nailed our stakes. But the sand gave way, and she said she'd sleep in the car—understandable, but a wincing reminder of breakage. I made the tent work, sort of, and crawled in to hear what I'd come for, the sweeping peace of waves, rustle of grasses. During the night the tent grew heavy with dew and fell in on me, a cold soaking skin, but I managed to push and prop it enough to keep it away. I slept until I knew it was light, then wormed out of my lean-to and saw the young world spread out all blue and white and singing, and the joy of it caught in my throat and I had no words for my astonishment. I let her sleep, my dear daughter who has no words for this grief, as I gathered wood from the other, shaded side for our fire that would burn off the chill and remind us that we are survivors and so much more, even when God seems far.



## MOUNTAINS AND SEA

In the mountains I learned strength, to exert myself against stone, to find light in the closed-in spaces. How sweet the windfall apples on the Roan. From a high ridge we sailed paper airplanes down. We turned over rocks in the creek and watched armored crawdads clash against the breach. As darkness fell, the trees released owls in a gray shawl of wings.

I learned too that mind is mountain and words are handholds to take us up to purer air. When they were small, the children and I played with words limber as willows, fat as plums. We wrote poems and bounced sounds. We coined, we rimed, we colluded, collided. We climbed. We read for hours, even as daylight thinned and our stomachs growled, the four of us bundled together on the couch as we soared to galaxies of peril and adventure.

Later, I acquired other students and with them at King College, grappled with grand and difficult books like *King Lear*, *Frankenstein*, *The Fall*. My mind grew strong, just as taking four flights of stairs to my office in White Hall toughened my stride.

But this does not mean there wasn't much to crush a woman. My house was the mirror of a dying marriage. Ivy twisted through cracks in the cinderblock, and cave crickets like frog-sized horrors sprang out of the basement's dark. During storms, rain gushed in at ground level, and there was always a kind of seepage at the heart



of the house that put me on edge, a damp uncertainty as I tended soup or made the bed or went upstairs to soothe a child's fretting.

The mountains taught me belief, for there they were, part of the sky itself, never moving. I must also admit to days, to years, when I never saw them at all.

• • •

But now I have come to live by water—to let, to launch, to loosen. How am I to understand the way water, the mystery of created water, is forming me in mid-life?

Had I moved to desert or suburb or farmland, I would be someone different, even as the mountains did their work of shaping. Geography, the spaces on this “pale blue dot,” cannot be understood apart from each of us in relation to the place where we have been set down, for the world was made the home of man and woman.

• • •

My new husband and I ride bikes on a gravelly path that cuts through Back Bay. We pedal through a skein of dragonflies. I glance back and catch his eye. The turtles look up from the water.

Passing through pine trees and shadows, through Wash Woods—an extinct settlement formed by shipwrecked survivors with only a remnant church steeple to mark its place in the world—we come to a rise, then a sudden continent, a secret ocean spreading silver before us, and we dismount and tramp through the sand to take it in. We are the sole humans looking out from this spot, a brief and glittering forever sealed unto us without a word, with only my hand pulsing in his.

## TOUCHES

His hand, like a bird's wing, brushes my face, traces my features.  
This new way of being loved makes me tremble and leave my  
shame.

I watch an old videotape of myself and feel embarrassed, for that woman caught on camera reading her poems in public seems, by her body language more than her words, to be saying, "I'm sorry to be standing here, so visible and vulnerable, but perhaps you will find value in the poems of these moments."

I read somewhere that existential shame is the psychological counterpart of an autoimmune disease attacking the body. Shame strikes at the self as if it were an intruder, a mistake. It stems from a spirit crushed by oppressive people who seek to expose, belittle, destroy.

This is different from the shame that follows moral transgressions. Shame was Peter's friend when he denied Christ, for in that terrifying anagnorisis when he saw his own Judas self, when the accusing, mountainous waves rose over his head, he felt the strength of a rescuing hand and let himself be taken. Shame was healed by love's touch.

My friend Linda rubs oil into the scalps of women at the Home for the Unwanted in Calcutta—one by one, the long row of strangers. As she works, she tries to rub out thoughts of what

might be hiding in the close-cropped hair of those frail castaways who have been given shelter. In these intimate encounters with the poorest of the poor, she is changed forever.

I, too, have stroked the skin of the dying. It was my own mother, her smooth, bare back. Surprising, how young her skin felt as I said with my hand, "I'm here."

Love is the hand that finds what needs touching.