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# Bread & Water; Love's Body

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# from Swan's Island

ELIZABETH SPIRES

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## Bread & Water

The long year after you left, walking  
from room to room, for no reason.  
On the worst nights, my body striped  
by weightless bars of moonlight.  
A trip south did me no good.  
Walking the beach in January, I came upon  
a mermaid, ribs hollowed out, one sandy arm  
thrown over her face, who lay on a strip  
of no-man's-land, tail curved in an ache  
toward the water. The next day she was gone,  
erased by the tide.

“A great prince in prison lies,”  
wrote Donne. I understood but would admit  
to no one. Although I ate, I starved,  
denied. My room: my cell.  
My ration: bread & water.

## Love's Body

Outside my window a loose branch,  
shaped like a shaky Y, hangs high  
in a tree half-dead, half-alive.  
Obedient to form, it mirrors the merely  
human: two skeletal legs covered with bark,  
with knots at the knees and twigs  
forking out where each foot should be;  
it has no upper torso.  
The seasons come and go, they come and go,  
and never is the branch swept down  
and carried away by rain or snow,  
by the force of wind  
mindlessly pounding the window.  
Instead, it holds to itself  
like the mind in meditation  
or, bad days,  
sways back and forth, back and forth,  
the way one does in love when torn in two,  
the hidden heartwood  
darkening in a word flood of emotion  
that asks *why, why*,  
no head, no hands, no mouth  
to shape a human answer,  
as we come and go, come and go,  
on a late cold afternoon in November,  
branch to leafless  
branch with each other, Nature breaking me  
down into something new  
I artlessly suffer to tell you.