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Bread & Water; Love's Body

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from Swan's Island

ELIZABETH SPIRES

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.