



three candles  
*featured poet*

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**Deborah Keenan**

# Deborah Keenan: *Selected Poems*

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## *Credits:*

"Angel Fish New Life" and "Living with Angels" appear in *One Angel Then*  
"Marriage", "Comfort", "Against the Good", "Mothers", and "The World" appear in *Happiness*  
"Grief", "What My Daughter Asked About the Angel in the Tree", "Admission", "An Excerpt from  
'Grace'", "Staying Afloat" and "Everything's Hurting/Daughter Poem" appear in *The Only  
Window that Counts*  
"The Subject", "Arbitrary Winter", and "A Poem About White Flowers" appear in *Household Wounds*

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These poems were collected by Ann Iverson for *three candles* as part of a collaboration between herself and Deborah Keenan. Iverson painted images from signal lines of Keenan's poetry.

## **Angel Fish New Life**

When I am most able to leave my lungs behind,  
When I am most free of the form I hide inside,  
When water is not the only home worth having,

then I'll ascend, from, darkness of sea earth,  
or rise from the muted excuse for soil deep  
in ocean beds.

Then I'll rise, fish-winged and halo-ed,  
smooth, with eyes that will never close again,  
I'll rise like all angels, so pure and good,  
move through fathoms of air, new air,

learn to breathe in, breathe out, like angels  
should, learn to move my wings, like angels  
must.

## **Marriage**

Long ago I came through the prairie,  
mountains broke from the earth and rose  
up. I was afraid and said the prairie was  
finished.

I do not follow the blood blue line  
On the map that would lead me to the San Juan mountains.  
I assume they do not exist, have little to teach me.  
I drive in a circle, a complicated and beautiful circle,  
And prairie, prairie, prairie is my choice, is all I see.

## Comfort

*"We have everything we need to believe  
right here in front of us."*

Dabney Stuart

I put my mouth on the wound of the tree.  
I breathed, a child in my father's yard.  
My breath was a Valentine, came from my red heart.

The tree lived long past the time of its wound.  
My father went to his grave, and I believed in his death.  
In the yard I would do his work, taught my children his name.

My mother inside the window watched us  
And we turned to wave, her love for us involuntary,  
Streaming through the glass, she held her position.

My oldest son said, high in the branches of the tree,  
"Here are his arms, I am swinging from his arms."  
The tree turned to me, promised to live until I could do  
without him.

## **Grief**

*Someone who is about to be left alone again,  
And can no longer stand it.*

*Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad/1925, Edward Hirsch*

This will have to stand for grief, this arrangement  
outside my window, children playing that old statue game,  
and the girl who's just no good at it.  
When the leader yells, "Freeze!" she's too liquid,  
can't claim whatever shape she'd hovering near.  
I want to be that girl on the dark green lawn  
who cannot hold her position. When you leave me  
again my mouth will be open, screaming, my legs  
running in your direction. And I don't even want  
to stop you, only desire my composure shattered,  
my body not held in check, I want to be calling  
you back with all the codes broken, so you will  
know the grief is alive and not considered.

## **What My Daughter Asked About the Angel in the Tree**

There's a mountain ash on fire outside the only window  
that counts, and the children grow restless seeing  
autumn is the end of things.

Why don't we let the angel of the tree inside?  
We've got no money to leave home with,  
and the architecture of our rooms spares us beauty  
and little else.

Oh, let that angel in. This is no annunciation;  
his wings are on fire, his sorrow is audible,  
and we are cold enough to be useful,  
lonely enough to be warmed.

## Admission

For Stephen

- II. *Will this trip appease a longing?  
(stalling for time) The longing to go to China,  
you mean?  
Any longing.*

*Project for a Trip To China, Susan Sontag*

I.

Nothing prepared me for the surprise  
of longing for you. Just fly east, I thought,  
to the breaking edge of America, find some sun,  
and the old comfort of silence and the empty bed.  
Fly east, not so far as China, just far enough away  
from acknowledged love,  
the fierce uncertainties.

II.

Sometimes I think I'm a hard person,  
harsh in spirit and language,  
always breaking fast for the Atlantic  
where nothing matters except sand,  
where nothing matters but the search  
for white stones, and the children  
who skim past in waves: my only work  
to catch them from the white foam before the tide  
forces them to face the ocean, not the dunes.

III.

I can hold children in my hands,  
I can slip white stones into pockets,  
I can walk the bay side, quiet life in tide pools,  
I can walk the ocean side, shuddering with solitude,  
its dark complications.  
I can do all this, and sleep alone, my body in fever



from too much sun, my eyes sorry to give up the light,  
the half -read book.

I know all these things, the accomplishments  
of a private life, yet the discovery  
that you had come east with me  
caught me up short, left me without breath.

Sometimes I think I know everything I want.  
This time I was wrong, admit without complacency  
that the memory of your mouth turned my heart  
like a red shell cast up  
by the one wave I could not resist swimming in.

## Living With Angels

i.

my children are cold  
angels in the snow.

the angels stay behind  
when I call my children in.

the cold with angels  
in reversed relief

float over the hillsides,  
no more children inside.

these angels lift  
from hills, winter angels,  
and there is no where to get warm  
when you are holy and white.

ii.

most people think  
and their thoughts are mud,  
or slip through the bleachers,  
most people think and the air  
goes crazy with bad energy.

avoid crowds: there's so little  
protection, and minimal rewards  
for mixing.

but when jesus thought something big,  
the form of his thoughts became an angel.  
he couldn't help it. Even when he thought,  
"where's my sandal?" an angel, small and quiet  
came to the world.

when jesus thought large things like parables,  
and especially when he changed little food  
to much, and when he drove the money changers  
from the temple, those times angels filled  
the air, clouds of angels encircled him,

some wanted to carry him away, He was so heavenly, they sighed, but he was tied to earth, while his thoughts grew wings.

there were times Jesus grew weary of the endless transformations,

even what he dreamed, alone, under the stars, changed into angels more beautiful than he, dressed more cleanly, possessing wings to lift them from the hot sand, away from what he had to stay for.

Jesus was at once confounded and jealous of these angels; they were made from his mind

yet lived apart, evanescent, joy riding as he shared his time with wary lepers, anxious disciples.

his thought forms made the air dense with angel traffic and sometimes in his slow progressions through towns the air was so heavy with wings he could hardly breathe.

the clutter in the sky grew immense, but only he could see them, he parted angel wings with his hands, just to walk, when he woke in morning new angels hovered where his dreams were born.

these were warm angels, born near desert, who have never met the cold angels left behind the children.

only children who cannot obey the call in winter turn to angels themselves frozen in red snowsuits, relief on hills, they become angels under soil, buried deep and sleeping, wings trying to move the earth.

iii.

when we rest on white sheets I press my arms in a wing pattern and your arms move to match them.

we are one angel then, a warm angel with  
wings inside shared skin; no swan can match  
us, no god in disguise disturb us.

we take the shape of this angel, carry it  
into worlds where we move alone; this is  
a quiet angel, rarely challenged, who emerges  
again when time connects us.

this angel lives in two.  
like the child inside the angel on the hill,  
like each separate angel inside jesus,  
born one by one.

the world is invisible angel place.  
when our eyes see something we can't believe,  
when our hands touch something insubstantial,  
when we hear the feathered hush in dreams,

those are angels attending us,  
heavy with wings and silence,  
who wait for us to rise and join them,

discouraged by our humanness,  
our knife-bright desires  
that tie us to the earth.

*"...they are preserved from change and consequently  
do not fall within the order of time..."*

E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*

the saint speaks of angels here,  
excluding me before I have time  
to draw my next, human breath.

times I have preserved myself from change  
I have been like a fallen angel, blood  
on my skin and driven by time.

when change became the way to live  
I wanted to move like angels move  
through lives, leaving singular blessings.

but, unable to stay because time pressed  
me on, the blessings grew perverse,  
there was a darkness in eyes I loved.

my arrivals and departures only emphasize

my humanness. I run but do not fly,  
afraid of certain changes, afraid to be

caught before I know if I have changed enough,  
have run away for the last time.  
I do fall within the order of time, the language

time speaks is my native tongue,  
I measure my life not with moments but in  
hours, I preserve myself from making a choice

as time moves like a dark angel  
through my life, changing me slightly  
with each dip of winged night or

broken day. The angel in me grows  
smaller, smaller,  
diminishing my claims for holiness,

turns smaller, grows tired, wings beating  
inside my human heart, unable to choose  
another life, so small and lost inside mine.

## **An Excerpt from “Grace”**

What is grace?

Almost always in summer. Growing up without palm trees, nature So manageable, you are on your knees because your father wanted you to be good at controlling nature, and you traveled so fast past pleasure and the idea of work you intrigued him for awhile, Almost always in summer. You could travel through order into heat, through heat into light, though you understood gravity, you dreamt of wings.

What is emptiness?

The absence of imagination. To imagine emptiness creates it falsely.

What is gravity?

It was invented to keep you in your place. A law. Gravity pulls babies out of you, hooks you to a floating planet, it is full of power and imagination, usually a man, often a mother , always something you have been taught you cannot do without.

Where is the finish?

No response. The cardinal stays all winter. He didn't forget to fly south. He wasn't supposed to. Never lie about things that can fly.

What is God?

Someone with so much color we can't see him. Someone with enough imagination to make lizards and roses and and gravity and babies.

# The Subject

*In Memory of Wendy Parrish*  
*Dear Friend 1950 - 1977*

i

We will paint this picture now,  
the only one worth painting, at once  
compelling, inviting,  
an essential back ground blue sky,  
sun, of course, heat should shimmer  
off the canvas.  
We are doing well, novices no longer,  
add some trees., for shade, for beauty,  
then the water, moved by imperceptible wind,  
this is our canvas, not mine alone,  
so the wind must be controlled.

The canvas has been stretched, now must stretch more  
to include brown and gold children.  
The child with daylight hair, the child  
whose hair carries the reminder of autumn.  
These children are moving  
on the canvas, they move for too many reasons  
to list, just let them move, on or off  
the canvas; they help carry the picture's  
true message.

Off to one side the mother rests. Her face turned  
to sun; let it be seen in this painting  
that she is willing it all to continue.  
Let it be understood: she can be motionless  
because the other guards  
these painted children.  
The mother's face should be at once fierce and peaceful.  
A hard face to capture.

The canvas expands, we artists cannot stop  
the images we collect, the canvas  
can bear all these scenes, collected in so many  
pairs of eyes, the canvas wants to contain  
all that is remembered.

ii

The central figure in this painting  
is moving at the water's edge

in lilac, in navy blue, and the temptation  
is strong in me, I want to add the wind  
that will move her hair, that will push her scowling  
back to me, saying, "Hell. This wind. I don't know why  
you enjoy it so much."

I want my answer included on the canvas. "Look,  
we share this disagreement, and few others. Go ahead,  
call the children, then help me  
pack up this clutter, all right, call the children.  
We will go home. The wind in the city will be kinder."

iii

The canvas will not dry. god knows I have placed  
it in cool rooms, hot rooms, have placed it against  
trees in winter wind, in spring sun, but the paint  
will not dry, it shines, the canvas is not full,  
wants more,  
we artists have worked hard, and although we have succeeded  
in some ways,

that background,  
the children,  
these women,

there is so much more the canvas  
hungers for, and there is not one among us  
who would not have chosen, given the chance,  
to have image after vision after image  
collect, always there would have been  
too much to paint, so much we would have put  
our brushes down with relief, let ourselves  
fall into this constantly incomplete canvas.

iv

We will paint this picture now,  
the only one worth painting.  
No gallery can deny us as we move relentlessly  
into another summer.

The sun,  
the children,  
the mother,

alone now, alert to their every motion..  
She will not turn her face to the sun as often  
this season,

and on some other canvas her face will be  
shadowed, eyes liquid,  
some essential sorrow painted there  
that no brush strokes away.



## Arbitrary Winter

i

The precise Rousseau jungle arrives in the mail.  
Why can't my friends understand they upset the balance  
I struggle for daily with their careless act?  
Life in the tropics is hard enough;  
my apartment, overwhelmed, gives in:  
sprouts, blooms, harvests itself. I grab the last  
untangled vine, swing out the window,  
an almost fatal escape.

ii

Am I free to live anywhere?  
I head for a colder climate.  
I need an arbitrary winter season  
so that nothing gets out of hand.

iii

Resettling burdens me.  
My polite domestic potted plants keep choosing  
to live without my help.  
My time is consumed; endless shopping for overcoats,  
boots. I replace each lost pair of mittens,  
spend the rest of my time wondering  
why I lose them so carefully,  
week by winter week.

iv

Geese fly north over my house.  
Their celebratory "v"  
darkens the sky.  
The thaw is unstoppable, the streets flood.  
I am carried away by April water.  
I try to convince myself it was time to move on.

v

Can nothing stop this?  
Everywhere I travel summer is.  
The roadside fruit and vegetable stands alarm me.  
So much has been harvested; it is only July.  
The fruit is mythic, carries the circle shape  
to extremes.  
I have to buy something so I won't die  
but feel trapped in some allegory of bountiful fruition.

I need my daughter stolen from me heartlessly  
so that everything will finish for a while and  
I can get some sleep, make a plan.

vi

I lie down on a summer field in night air,  
The northern lights, the moon arcing up from the east,  
each flower alive in its own grace;  
their messages glow with clarity.  
I choose to give up for the first time and fall  
asleep: no tears, no strategies, knowing nature  
will make all my decisions but the final one.

## Against the Good

Who can vote against the good?  
The easy and expected beauty:  
You know the list: ocean, lily,  
throat of a swan.

I'm in a dream now.  
Nothing fearful or ugly comes  
my way, so waking holds few  
rewards this morning.

Today I will think about  
things you never brought me  
unfolding flowers that captivated,  
peace that was a willingness  
for days to be  
ordinary but all right.

I think that you always  
voted against the good.  
And your unhappiness,  
your commitment to all  
that was broken and wrong  
filled me sorrow  
I now see as rage. So  
I feel the rage like a  
natural force: house-smashing  
wind, sun at the equator.  
I'm useless now, passionate  
yet changing nothing.

## A Poem About White Flowers

my father chose a train  
gave it the gift of his body  
bright july sun  
the engine lifted his form  
hurled it scattered it moved on  
we pretended there was enough left  
to cremate

and the white flowers you gave me are so right  
they fill my home I think of them  
slashes of petal white  
I play endless game after endless game  
of solitaire  
just so I can sit with those slashing white flowers  
I love these flowers from you  
they surprise me the way the roses didn't  
they touch me the way a good white cliché  
is supposed to touch all women who believe  
in words like white and fragrance who believe  
in daisies pretending to be zinnias and in daisies  
swearing they are white chrysanthemums

by the tracks my brother searched  
for father's property  
july sun burning to nothing the last  
fragments of my father's beautiful  
piano hands  
he found the wallet torn pictures  
pieces of identity that identified  
a man who came to dread his own

by the train station my brother found  
two lovers who had been giving each other  
their bodies  
when they heard the train's emergency scream  
they forgot the pleasure they had been seeking  
and sought another

when they looked up the air carried  
my father toward them they were frightened  
by the blood the choice of death  
so near their open fields of love

and the white flowers you gave me  
don't fade today the white  
phosphorescent against a winter gray window  
I love them for not fading today  
for being white not red not dying not red  
for being white and themselves  
whatever they are whatever they become

## Staying Afloat

A nice glass of water with no ice inside, or maybe just the very heart of a head of lettuce. Maybe this year no one getting cut while carving the face into a pumpkin. A good statue that no one else has found might make it happen, or just a can of vegetable beef soup without so much barley filling it up. Maybe not going to Florence but having a really complete dream of it. Or your son catching so many fish he finally stops worrying about his lures. Stamps without American flags could carry you a long way to this place, or no grocery shopping for months. Maybe moving everyone who knows your phone number to a secret country without telephone wire., or just all the telephone poles dressed like scarecrows for amusement and separation. No more birds, less need for sleep. Everyone who wonders if they want children gets them but they're returnable if it doesn't work out. A nice new set of sheets, or a strike by the bookkeepers at your bank, money flowing like silk off the bolts. No more drive-through arrangements at fast food joints, and everybody out waking with enough strollers for all the babies so their arms don't get jerked quite so often. Plenty of apples, enough wind, windows that stay open, and a calm and easy relationship with desire.

## Everything's Hurting/Daughter Poem

*For molly megan keenan*

a daughter who puts bandaids on water faucets  
and on lions she names polly, white bandages wrapped  
around legs of chairs, around china teacups; this kind  
of daughter is the one i held out for, she's the easiest  
joy i claim.

i think keats was her father. i think she could make  
the frozen ones on the Grecian urn come to life with  
her fingertips, the frozen bride, the bold lover with mouth  
of marble, suddenly warm, cold silence lifted.  
she is friend to god, travels through his inner ear  
seeking salvation for a mother who sins by not believing.

she is friend to zero, dog named after a number on his tag,  
friend to slow ones in the stores, apologizes for my speed  
through the lanes, explains to them why one of her doll's eyes  
won't open, why the apple juice cries when we don't buy it.

i think she was born in devon. i think milk makes her  
white inside, i think her color is green, her eyes gray  
to make my father come back to life. i think she was born  
to cancel out some pain i cannot stop from hurting.

## Mothers

The one who begs forgiveness, the one eating the smallest  
Piece of meat at dinner, uneasy carnivore.

The one lifting the baby to see the moon, the one who helps  
The baby see the moon any night without clouds.

She buys the same things at the grocery store each week,  
Chooses the wrong cereal, redeems herself, reads out loud

past bedtime to the child with tired eyes, the child who  
wept. "I said Frosted Flakes, not Corn Pops. Never Corn Pops."

The mother who sees the future, each child adrift, and herself  
Powerless, the mother playing rock-and-roll songs while children

Wait for their turn at the stereo. The mother with too much  
To do can't stop listening to STOP MAKING SENSE, the mother

Who knows all the words by heart, the mother who doesn't own  
Her heart too often, the one washing out her son's shirt

By hand after the acrylic paint exploded backwards out of the  
Tube he held as he bent over his painting, the mother who rages,

Who throws the Kirby vacuum cleaner down the stairs, screams  
Into the beloved child's face, "*I can't do it for you, you must*

*Care about yourself.*" The one who's read *Jane Eyre* too many times,  
The one looking for privacy, the one who smokes the cigarette,

And the one who's always quitting smoking, the one who's never  
Lost a child, the one who holds the dying child, and gives her

Mind away to the sky, the dirt. The mother cannot let the child  
Die and be called mother, so when the child dies the mother

Gives her mind away and does not understand what she is holding  
In her hands.



## The World

The sex of the world  
is never hidden.

This is a problem in the world  
Magic said "I accommodated as many ladies  
as I could ...there are certain  
sexually desirable people.  
There is a list. We can get it  
any time we wish." And we wish it

constantly.  
When do we see  
when we see the world?  
Trees and flowers and skyscrapers  
opening and closing.  
A sexual mouth opens and closes,  
flower with no season.  
The mouth of the fish  
risking everything.

In the eye  
of the storm we are sexual people,  
sexual animals, sexual plants  
sucked into the terror of the wind.  
The world grows quiet then,  
And the dead tumble from the sky.

What can we do with this openness?  
Desire, the wound we carry,  
Is open.

## About the Author:



Photo credit: Tim Francisco

Deborah Keenan is the author of *Household Wounds*, *One Angel Then*, *How We Missed Belgium* (a collaborative book with Jim Moore), *The Only Window That Counts*, and *Happiness* (which is almost sold out of its second edition). With poet Roseann Lloyd she co-edited *Looking for Home: Women Writing About Exile*, which won the American Book Award in 1991 for multi-cultural literature. She's received two Bush Foundation Fellowships, an NEA fellowship, the Loft-McKnight Poet of Distinction Fellowship, and other grants and awards. She is a full-time Associate Professor in the Master of Fine Arts and the Master of Liberal Studies Graduate Programs at Hamline University, St. Paul. She is married and the mother of four children, and at work on a novel and her next book of poetry, *Good Heart*, will be published by Coffee House Press within the next two years. She has twice received the Professor of the Year Award for teaching and service at Hamline University, where she works full-time as an associate professor in the Master of Liberal Studies and the Master of Fine Arts graduate programs.

### **About the Artist:**

Ann Iverson is a visual artist and poet. Her poetry has appeared in *Water-Stone*, 2000 and 2001. A graduate of both the Master of Liberal Studies and Master of Fine Arts Programs at Hamline University, her thesis, *A Certain Kind of Holiness*, was nominated for the Outstanding Thesis Award. She currently teaches at Dunwoody Technical Institute and The Loft in Minneapolis.

The watercolors exhibited here are from a collaborative project with Deborah Keenan. The images are studies of lines in Deborah's poems. As a poet herself, she came to a new understanding of the possibilities within the poetic line and of the poem as a vehicle for untapped visual expression.

The image of the tree that opens this collection was inspired by a line from the poem "Comfort." *The tree lived long past the time of its wound.*

The image of the fish with wings below was inspired by a line from "Angel Fish New Life." *Then I'll rise, fish-winged and halo-ed..*



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