



NOON UNDER THE MOON

HOUSE UNDER THE MOON HOUSE UNDER THE MOON

*House*  
Under the Moon

Michael Sowder

# House Under the Moon

Also by Michael Sowder

*The Empty Boat*

*Whitman's Ecstatic Union*

*A Calendar of Crows*

*Flouse*  
Under the Moon

Michael Sowder



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*In memoriam:*

Eileen J. Wall

(1916–2012)

And for Jennifer, Aidan, and Kellen

And with deep gratitude to my teacher,

Ma Indira Devi

*Something mysteriously formed,  
Born before heaven and Earth.  
In the silence and the void,  
Standing alone and unchanging,  
Ever present and in motion.  
Perhaps it is the mother of ten thousand things.*  
—Dao De Ching

*Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever ancient, ever  
new, late have I loved Thee.*  
—Augustine of Hippo

*The bhakti path winds in a delicate way.*  
—Kabir

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# Homecoming

*Kabir says: Listen, my friend,  
there is one thing in the world that satisfies,  
and that is a meeting with the Guest.*

—Kabir

## *Lectio Divina*

With my mother's pitted paring knife  
I slice the yellow, uncut pages.  
*La Vida de Santa Teresa de Jesus.*  
No tears. Then,  
her voice.

Is it just the old story of wander  
and homecoming that triggers this  
in breath—Euricleia touching Odysseus's scar?

When I was young her words were gold  
leaf, plucked strings, feathery. I trembled  
at *Muero porque no muero!*  
*I die because I do not die!*  
in Him. I turn pages and her steel  
flashes. *Descanso? I need no rest.*  
*What I need is crosses.*

Or is it the way I've found my  
dawn cries lifted, sung  
by a woman, an Atlantic  
away, centuries ago, in a convent  
of barefoot nuns, a town of stone and light,  
in a book I've called from a warehouse,



# The Middle Way

—for Jennifer

I was entering the middle of the end of a divorce from a woman who'd appeared like the sun and the moon to me, and who, incredulous, was herself in the middle of an affair with a woman, and when confronted, locked herself in the bathroom and cut at her wrists.

I was exploiting a post-separation rebound affair with a tall blonde German in black leather whom I goaded into hurting me for all that I had done and not done.

I was in the middle of a five-year game of Hold'm, Low Hole Wild, Stud, and Fuck Your Buddy—joneses of triumph and rage—proxy catharses for the real crap I was in.

I was stitching together a book out of elder, mullein, and pokeweed,

putting away icons of Jesus, Mary, Shiva, Sarasvati, converting to a bad Buddhism,

burning court briefs in the pit behind the house.

I was in the middle of therapy.

It was June in the house of my vacationing Calvinist professor. On the fourth floor of her Tudor mansion, gabled like an attic, though an attic hovered above, I climbed into her claw-foot tub,

and in hot water beside a wall of a hundred tiny window  
panes cascading down to the porcelain, I gazed out through  
handkerchief-waving poplars to an Ann Arbor street.

And somewhere in the middle of *Tropic of Cancer* and *The Life  
of Teresa* I picked up the phone and the nerve and called and  
asked you to canoe with me down the Huron River where around  
a willowy bend, I promised, a great blue heron would lift itself  
impossibly off the water,

not knowing that out of the mud and muck of the middle of things,  
something was unfolding, being born,

that we would marry and raise sons in the West.

Sunlight cut through maples and oaks, dazzled water that cradled  
me, and you said, *Yes*, and I lay my head back on the marble,  
knowing I'd just been made king in a house and story I did not own.

# Eckhart says

as the leaves of a tree  
    turn,  
a hart  
    or a woman turns  
towards lightning before  
    it strikes, we turn  
toward You.

Across the river, a voice calls, like  
a parent's, a lover's, a child's.  
    The boatman pulls the boat onto the water.  
I climb in and watch as the bow is swept  
    into the rainbow mist  
and thunder  
of the Ganges River.

# What He Left

—for my father

1.

With a glass of Kentucky bourbon  
lit by a lamp, I leaf my father's *Life  
and Literature of England*,  
eleven hundred pages, mid-century  
woodcuts, broken spine, floated down  
to me after his death. I track him to The Rose,  
The Abbey, to nightingales in the lime-tree bower,  
gathering words he left in the margins, minted  
in his hand: *Chiasmus. Caesura. Learn by heart.*  
His name like a mantra in Kentucky hieroglyphs:  
*Walter. Walter. Walter.*  
I feel the sultry summer classroom,  
nineteen fifty-four, felt trousers,  
fan whirling, mockingbird trills.

2.

September. Seventy-five. Under yellow poplars  
Doctor Haddin stood up in the grass, and said,  
*Why, I've read Walden like it was the only book  
in the world.* With black beard and blowing hair  
he took out his violin to prove it. He was  
Chagall's green fiddler, leapt  
down from the English balcony,  
flinging cardinals, goldfinch, indigo buntings, out of  
Bach's *Chaconne in D*, and I knew I'd found my home.

3.

On two-twenty-seven, my mother's name  
dangles like an ornament  
between the columns  
of the "Eve of Saint Agnes."

*Kathleen*

*Agnes*

*Wall*

etched in the meticulous, drunken ink  
of a cut heart. How much he made  
of the *w*'s of their names!

*W*'s flock and scatter,  
kettle,  
and cascade,  
wingtips  
linked through  
a hundred years of poetry.

4.

Later that year, armed with newer metrics, he flew  
to the Philippines to tap out code to  
brigades in Korea, and came home wounded  
to scale the towers of a dying industry—red-faced  
at traffic, at bosses younger than him, at splintered  
trusses, broken deals and bikes and sons breaking away.

5.

Once, his face candled by firelight,  
he loosed the galloping dactyls, six hundred

in suicidal charge of the Light Brigade.

6.

Kentucky whiskey warms my chest, but I'm  
late for the lesson—the story of a boy  
who one summer, in love with my mother,  
learned poems by heart and left words  
in the margins I would never hear him say.

*Terza Rima. Heroic couplet. Alexandrine.*



*Through transcendent, lyric verse, these poems explore the spiritual struggle for harmony between the contemporary and contemplative life. Blending several religious traditions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian mysticism, and Sufism, Sowder's poems achieve the essence of devotion—both familial and divine—as he graciously takes readers with him along the path to enlightenment.*

The poems in Michael Sowder's marvelous second collection, *House Under the Moon*, enact "the old story of wander / and homecoming," the story of a person lost in the wilderness finding a way home. As he moves us out into the world and back to the hearth, Sowder engages us in an expansion and contraction that is like nothing so much as a beating heart, or the breath that guides the poet in the daily meditation central to his spiritual practice. By turns straightforward and mystical, ultimately the movement of the poems takes us in one direction, toward love; love that is spiritual, romantic, filial; love, finally, for the self and therefore for what lives outside the self.

— KATHARINE COLES

Although these powerful poems are poems of the world, they are also poems of the spirit. Michael Sowder is a rarity among the poets of his generation—indeed, among the poets of any generation. He is a seeker, a searcher after meaning, a yearner for consequence. He knows that the secret message of poetry is connection, and he knows that to turn inward and find the spirit is also to discover the spirit moving through the world. These graceful and stirring poems make those magical connections. Sowder has matured into one of our finest spiritual poets. This is a book of deep and lasting beauty.

— DAVID BOTTOMS

Surprise is one of the most satisfying elements in Michael Sowder's resonant, haunting, *House Under the Moon*. What appears to be a gentle narrative attention to the delicate complexities of human interaction with mountains and rivers—hiking, making love, tending babies—never stays in one dimension. I don't think I've ever read such a mythic eye-opening, and yes surprising, account of a poet's *satori* via the middle way of everyday life.

— DIANE WAKOSKI

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