

Letters from Three Women · *Wendy Battin*

We are moving from state to state,
as they say of excited electrons, or
of water when it freezes
and sublimates,
or of the mind when it enters a drug
like an airplane.

When the letters bloom out of their envelopes
I think it must be spring,
remembering winter and the mailbox empty.
The pages collect on my desk, interleaved
like hands in a public oath. What
are we swearing to?

One has married her solitude,
wants a divorce.

One imagines that she
has not been understood.

One imagines she has.

The snapshot
taken through a finger-printed lens
records identity and place: the smudge
floats on the landscape,
a halo whose saint has walked out.
One morning I watched from the beach
as a house rounded Long Point into the harbor.
Pennants, strung from the cupola
down to the barge, snaked in the wind and shot
the gulls through with panic.
The windows and doors had been boarded shut,
as if the house would founder if it woke.

You know me. I thought,
*This is history: a house floating sullenly
over the ocean.*
Just look at the baggage we carry.

It docked at Macara's wharf for months,
waiting for cranes from New Bedford to lift it
bodily, as we all wait

in our rented rooms, or when
there's money, in apartments.
Today I receive you all in my room,
which dangles over traffic. The last
huddled on the ground of a different
city, under the weight of those
families I heard in the night,
like Hansel in the oven, listening.

I hear, for example, that lessons learned
drunk are best remembered drunk,
that the mind
knows this on the ocean and something
else at the kitchen table over coffee;
and think
especially of the humpbacks, who pass
their songs from ocean to ocean
in intricate barter.

Some days
I read you between the mailbox and my door,
the way we've eaten whole meals cooking them.

The ocean is a mind with a tune running through it.

The sun here
travels into an ocean so monstrous we call it
peaceful, adrift on the land.