

*Annie Finch*



spells

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

# Spells

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# WESLEYAN POETRY

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ANNIE FINCH

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# PREFACE

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As long as I can remember, my life has been dedicated to poetry—to dreaming, hearing, reading, and making poems. *Spells* gathers the most important of this poetic work written over four decades, from 1970 to 2010. In addition to selections from my books *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* (1982), *Eve* (1997), *Calendars* (2003), and *Among the Goddesses: An Epic Libretto in Seven Dreams* (2010), *Spells* collects many new and previously unpublished poems, including “The Lost Poems,” experimental, metrical poems from the 1980s that did not find their audience until the recent embrace of formal poetic strategies by avant-garde poets.

The poetry in *Spells* is organized into sections by decade. Rather than grouping the poems according to the books in which they first appeared, I have chosen to arrange the poetry so that readers can follow its unfolding in reverse chronological order. The two short final sections, of translations and performance work, are arranged in chronological order and will spiral you forward again. The collection includes lyric and narrative poems, performance texts, verse drama, translations, libretti, chants, rituals, elegies, sonnets, villanelles, and poetica, epithalamia, valentines, prayers, letters, dialogues, pastiche, and other shapes. Most of the poems are spoken in ancient and contemporary rhythms: sapphics, cretics, dactyls, amphibrachs, trochees, anapests, folk stanzas, iambs, and others.

The book’s title, *Spells*, captures my sense of poetry as a performative art—patterned language that invites readers to experience words not just in the mind but in the body. The title also points to the spiritual foundation of my aesthetic. As a Wiccan, I write poems and incantations to strengthen our connections to each other, to the passage of time, and to the sacred cycles of nature.

Compiling this book has led me to appreciate how much I was inspired as a poet by coming of age during the feminist movement of the 1970s. Reading it has helped me understand the ways I struggled over the years to throw off the burden of misogyny on my spiritual, psychological, intellectual, political, and poetic identities. My themes are often female-centered: sexuality; friendship; childbirth, breastfeeding, mothering, and abortion; sexism and incest; women’s mythology and spirituality; and personal and cultural foremothers. I am proud to define myself as a woman poet. Women’s poetry, from the ancient Sumerian Enheduenna to Dickinson and her neglected “poetess” sisters and daughters, including Osgood, Dunbar-Nelson, Teasdale, and Millay, and forward through Bishop, Plath, Bogardus, Helen Adam, H.D., Brooks, Kizer, and Lorde, has been critically important to me (along with, of course, the work of many beloved male poets). In my current lyric, narrative, and epic poetry, as well as in my dramas and libretti, my ambition is to create a body of work for a re-emerging matriarchal culture.

Throughout my career, I have collaborated with other artists, on architectural and visual installations, musical settings and opera, drama and performance poetry, and translations. My aim as a translator is to embody the spirit of the original poems within their original formal constraints (e.g., Akhmatova’s amphibrachs, Labé’s rhyme schemes, Sappho’s sapphics) allowing the reader to experience the poetry’s original shapes. In my dramatic pieces, I am drawn to mythopoetic theater’s blending of spoken language with music, choreography and masks, to enact a ritual journey toward psychological and spiritual power.

Compiling *Spells* has been a transformative experience that has filled me with gratitude for the fierce and accepting Muse who has whispered poetry into my meditative darkness over the past half-century. I invite the reader to speak these poems aloud (even if only in the mind), and to be open to the spells they cast.

Portland, Maine

June 2012

# New Poems

---

These are the hours to revel in.

## BLESSING ON THE POETS

---

Patient earth-digger, impatient fire-maker,  
Hungry word-taker and roving sound-lover,  
Sharer and saver, muser and acher,  
You who are open to hide or uncover,  
Time-keeper and -hater, wake-sleeper, sleep-waker;  
May language's language, the silence that lies  
Under each word, move you over and over,  
Turning you, wondering, back to surprise.

# HOME BIRTH

---

Home is a birthplace since you came to me,  
pouring yourself down through me like a soul,  
calling the cosmos imperiously  
into me so it could reach to unroll  
out from the womb where the wild rushes start  
in a quick, steady heartbeat not from my own heart.  
This is my body, which you made to break,  
which gave you to make you, till you bear its mark,  
which held you till you found your body to take,  
(open at home on my bed in the dark).

# ABORTION SPELL

---

Let's keep the world through its own balanced kiss,  
the kiss come from women made of our own blood,  
the holder, the cooler (redeeming the earth,  
shaping the room where we give you your birth).  
Hands born of woman will not stop this flood,  
this generous, selfish, long-opening gift.



# YOUR LAND

---

As I went walking in the land of our heart,  
I found the animals crying.  
Their mouths and warm bodies were sudden and slow  
And they moved slow and hard to the edge of the woods.  
Their legs and their heartbeats and skins were dying.  
They curled up like snails at the end of the world.

This land is your land, this land is my land.

As I went out walking, the trees became bark.  
They turned in their power and knowledge and pain.  
Their arms grew wide open, their lives fell apart.  
I heard them in peace and I heard them in horror,  
And each leaf or hand was the eye of a world.

This land is your land, this land is my land.

As I went walking by the side of the sea,  
I found the waves understanding.  
They rolled out of silence and into the mist,  
And into the light where it seemed they were pouring.  
They roiled with pollution and anger and love,  
And the currents of freedom kept rolling.

This land is your land, this land is my land.

## STONE AND CLOTH AND PAPER

---

*At every gust the dead leaves fall*  
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Rainy Day”

Two close centuries of stone and cloth and paper  
chalked your cheeks and carved your hands to broken.  
You are not a monument any more, now—  
more like a forest

moving shadows under simple trees, dark rivulets  
mottling snow fading in this warm gray winter,  
melting the centuries you didn't know, Henry Longfellow—  
wait—I can hear you—

a low and earnest voice, wind in fir trees, burning  
through this room, where you wrote your saddest poem,  
through this house, where the farm and family built you.  
Your sister Ann's portrait

stumbles, eyes black as night behind a candle.  
The marble urn in your red brick yard has fallen,  
knocked down in the emptiness of the fountain.  
Cries of the seagulls

reach through walls to find you again, pour down  
the carrying knowledge that grew your branching gardens—  
and tell me which old words, which new wings, will carry  
you from this courtyard.

# THE NAMING

---

Lopez, Jurgens, Lozowsky, O'Connor, Lomax  
(Shoes, and spirals, dust, and the falling flowers)  
Díaz, Dingle, Galletti, DiPasquale,  
Katsimatides

Wounds widen the remembering earth.  
Closed eyes see beyond the flames.  
Grief opens hands to feel the wind.  
Heart beats like ocean and hears the names:

DiStefano, Eisenberg, Chung, Green, Dolan,  
(Women running suddenly in their high heels)  
Penny, York, Duarte, Elferis, Sliwak,  
Yamamadala,

Closed eyes see beyond the flames.  
Grief opens hands to feel the wind.  
Heart beats like ocean and hears the names.  
Wounds widen the remembering earth:

Weinstein, Villanueva, West, Sadaque,  
(Spirals, dust and spiraling dust and hours)  
Bowman, Burns, Kawauchi, Buchanan, Reilly,  
Reese, Ognibene,

Grief opens hands to feel the wind.  
Heart beats like ocean and hears the names.  
Wounds widen the remembering earth.  
Closed eyes see beyond the flames.

Kushitani, Ueltzhoffer, Wong, Ferrugio,  
(Breathed in only in or beyond the naming),  
Inghilterra, Tzemis, Liangthanasam,  
Coladonato—  
Heart beats like ocean and hears the names.  
Wounds widen the remembering earth.  
Closed eyes see beyond the flames.  
Grief opens hands to feel the wind.

Sanchez, Talbot, Afflito, Siskopoulos  
(Every question with a long sob of naming)  
Tarantino, Zempoaltecatl, Thorpe, Koo,  
Stergiopoulos,

Zion, Zinzi, Song, Shahid, Santiago,  
Ortiz, Pabon, Ou, O'Neill, Newton-Carter,  
Miller, Mohammed,  
Zakhary, Campbell,  
Deming, DiFranco,  
Chowdhury, Blackwell,  
Zucker, McDowell,  
Goldstein, Basmajian . . .

---

Wounds widen the remembering earth.  
Closed eyes see beyond the flames.  
Grief opens hands to feel the wind.  
Heart beats like ocean and hears the names.

## FROST'S GRAVE

---

I think of your quiet grave now and again  
When innocence has rolled me out of sleep  
Close to my husband's side, to lean again  
Against his breathing human side, to keep  
Myself breathed in his liquid human breath.  
I think of your nurturing grave so often. Death  
Has made you a place I like to imagine going:  
Opening the gate to your grave, entering in,  
Reaping your silence where a small tree, growing  
Generous in the forgiveness of your sin,  
Leans over your stone, the grass, your bones, the grass,  
The grass. The grass. I like to imagine frost there, hung  
Like frost on a beach in November, when the sun  
Rises on winter, just as it rose on spring,  
On the humid decision to grow, past everything.

## TAROT: THE MAGICIAN CARD

---

Rain wets the wand, wind moves a sword,  
lightning lights crystal where the thundering cup  
forms me a channel and takes on a word,  
pouring the pentacle I gather up.  
Time carves the storm in the palm of my hand,  
till it fills with shapes that send me down  
through my river-body. Do I stand  
at a table the waiting planet surrounds?  
Through my own fingers, eyes, and palm,  
and through other worlds, huge or small,  
one fury spins and turns me calm;  
I breathe and watch it land and fall,  
holding what I hardly know or see,  
filled with the storm that makes, makes me.

# KEYS

---

*Phi Beta Kappa poem, Yale University, 2011*

Like an island, a key makes a door. In the surge  
Of its mineral clarity, seas come unbound.  
Though an arch curves together, the keystone will stay  
Braced in gravity, locked by immensity, wound  
To a temple in air by the spiraling play  
That could tumble much heavier forces. What's found  
Past the musical notes that cascade and converge  
In a key, past the tock the tick carries away  
When it's wound by a key? There are patterns that merge

Meanings, silent until we code them open,  
Clued to us by the random knowing tribes:  
Carvings, letters, hands, faces, symbols, stars.  
Each warm friction's vibration circumscribes  
One more seat in the clearing where we are  
Gathered, circling a home we can't describe.  
What's the word but a word that can't be spoken?  
Who'd tear pleasure out past life's iron bars?  
Where's the use of a code that won't be broken?

A ring of keys hangs like a question at your side.  
You move through the answering darkness like a key,  
While windows of moonlight branch down the catacombs  
And rustle each prisoner into mystery.  
Each lock, like each room, is alone till the opening comes;  
Your ring reaches one, then another. Liberty  
Repeats down the corridor, doors pulled open wide,  
Exploding more showers of sweetness through the combs  
Whose locks had been waiting for one key to be tried.



# BEACH OF EDGES

---

A drift of snow edges a new drift of sand  
As edges grow deeper. It's March, month of edges.  
Wet rocks yield to pebbles like opening hands.

The glisten of rockweed trails, splutters, and bends,  
And sparkles of rivulets bounce down in ledges.  
A drift of snow edges a new drift of sand;

It's March, month of edges, and I'm left to stand  
Alone outside time as new light pulls and nudges  
Wet rocks. Yield to pebbles like opening hands,

Light; pull me from winter. How have I planned  
For light that's not winter, for live light that fledges  
A drift of snow, edges a new drift of sand

Beyond my last sight, and waves me like a wand  
Out back over the surges of these rocking sedges?  
Wet rocks yield to pebbles like opening hands;

I want to go back to him, as to the land;  
light, carry me over from the wild old grudges.  
A drift of snow edges a new drift of sand;  
Wet rocks yield to pebbles like opening hands.

# EARTH DAY

---

All we want is to find the love  
in the faces of the people we love.  
All we need is to find the dark  
in the nighttime sky, to lie down to sleep  
in the darkness, where stars and moon keep vigil,  
in the silence of a sleeping earth.  
All we require is to wake to sunlight  
in the morning, to simple sky,  
to breathe aloud as the sky is breathing,  
to drink the water of the earth.

All we need is to touch the planet  
and find it clean where we were born,  
where our ancestors breathed and planted,  
where we live with the plants and birds.

All we need is to live with the memory  
of a future we want to imagine.  
All we want is to find the love  
in the face of the planet we love.

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