

# IF HE HAD NOT HAD TWO HANDS TATTOOED ON HIS CHEST

*for S. S. B.*

If Michelangelo had not painted God reaching his hand toward Adam If Adam had not reached his hand toward God If I had not wanted to be alone by the lake If the young man had not asked me to teach him how to swim If he had not had two hands tattooed on his chest If I had given him more warning about the depth of the water If I had not swum out to a rock in the lake If I had not turned to see him following me If he had not had two hands tattooed on his chest If I had not started to swim back toward him If I had not told him not to struggle If I had not reached out my hand If the tips of his fingers had not brushed mine As he slipped down in the water Without a word Without a cry To be found three hours later tangled in sea weed I would not have walked away calm Not grieving Then grieving As if God had not touched Adam

## LETTER FROM THE SNAKE WOMAN

for K. W.

Señor, I am glad you recognize me. Rattling is a poor substitute for speech. They say my tongue is forked and fear me, but it is an attempt to speak an honest language between man and God that divides me. The earth never leaves me. I move across it with the motion of waters, at home in such dry places as desert, prairie, mountains of rock. My spirit becomes bird and flies out of my flesh. It hurts to change skin. I lock my head to my tail and hold the world in the loop. I circle your finger. Eve listened to me. The Greeks saw me wise and named me. The Indians know me. I am the song in *encantadora*. Call me Sophia. I have been here before.

What explanation is given for the phosphorus light  
That you, as boy, went out to catch  
When summer dusk turned to night?  
You caught the fireflies, put them in a jar,  
Careful to let in some air,  
Then you fed them dandelions, unsure  
Of what such small and fleeting things  
Need, and when  
Their light grew dim, you  
    Let them go.

There is no explanation for the fire  
That burns in our bodies  
Or the desire that grows, again and again,  
So that we must move toward each other  
In the dark.  
We have no wings.  
We are ordinary people, doing ordinary things.  
The story can be told on rice paper.  
There is a lantern, a mountain, whatever  
    We can remember.

Hiroshige's landscape is so soft.  
What child, woman, would not want to go out  
Into that dark, and be caught,  
And caught again, by you?  
I want these pictures of the floating world  
To go on, but when  
The light begins to dim, catch me.  
Give me whatever a child imagines  
To keep me aglow, then  
    Let me go.