

PAM BERNARD

## Des destinees de l'ame

*I think always of you waiting.*

—W.S. Merwin

While visiting the Houghton Rare Book library,  
my professor, steeped in the Incunabulum,  
handed me a small volume, titled  
*Des destinees de l'ame*, saying casually  
that it had been bound with human skin.  
*A woman's back*, he whispered, leaning in  
to meet my eyes. And from that moment,  
I've tried to fashion a story for her.  
The author was Arsène Houssaye, dandy  
of the Second Empire, a *fantaisiste*,  
like many of the romantics—who even  
Baudelaire courted, but secretly ridiculed.  
Houssaye presented his work  
to his friend Dr Ludovic Bouland, who  
had saved the woman's skin for just  
the right occasion, and when the volume  
came into his possession, he had it rebound,  
expressing his belief that such meditations  
on the soul after death merited a human skin.  
A noted bibliophile, the good doctor  
commanded that the binding be  
unadorned—save for a bit of gold trim—  
to preserve its elegance, so what lay  
in my hands was otherwise unremarkable,  
a plain text of greenish-gold hue,  
patterned with pores through which

her skin once breathed.  
She had been a mental patient, whose  
body upon death from apoplexy lay  
unclaimed. For years I have yearned  
for some quiet place for her to emerge—  
in my writing, my dreams—  
even once traveling three thousand miles  
in hopes I might find her—but she was neither  
there, nor anywhere I searched.  
Then one soft afternoon as I crossed  
the back meadow, I came upon her  
humming among butterflyweed  
and cranesbill, the hem of her  
walking dress darkened with mud.  
Her hair was swept back into a single  
loose braid, and she wore a necklace  
of nutmeg and violets.  
She did not seem to notice me,  
and I stood for a long while observing  
her slow, desultory wanderings, pausing  
here and there, then scanning  
the western horizon, where the sun  
was already sliding behind rushes  
and wild rye—her sweet face  
turning more pensive as if  
she had not yet found what she sought,  
and it would soon be too late.  
Finally she faded, along with all  
familiar things, into the growing dark.  
I never saw her again.  
I wish I could say I'd felt her—and she  
me—that day in the library, through  
the mandatory white cotton gloves  
we'd been instructed to wear—as if  
my turning the book over and over

in amazement might rouse her  
from her terrible slumber, rescue her  
from the shelf upon which she had stood  
for so long—from a life, which, even  
in death, did not belong to her.