

Reading Charlotte Pence's breakthrough book, *Code*, I remember T. S. Eliot reminding us that humankind cannot bear very much reality. Perhaps the best way to bear the reality of our genetic structure, the code of her title, the thing that determines who we are, is to make poetry of it. After all, we want to believe that we have the free will to exist, to live and to love, and to celebrate our lives with our art. Charlotte Pence with her moving story of birth and loss has enhanced the language of poetry with the discourse of science, with the language of data. Her poetry reminds us that even as we know more and more about who we really are, life itself remains beautifully mysterious.

—Mark Jarman, author of *The Heronry*

Charlotte Pence's *Code* is deeply grounded in domestic settings that open onto broader vistas and "time longer than any dream." For Pence, motherhood holds the mysteries of the natural and human-made worlds—one where "we all began in dark and stars" but where we also wish "for sleep, / for peace, for the coming day to be better." For this poet, the maternal body and the body politic are closely connected, and *Code* is rich with urgent lines that pay close attention to the complicities of privilege and the need to shape the next generation's social conscience. Through a voice both tender and bracingly honest, Pence reinvents domestic tableaux in poems that are provocative, humane, and deeply necessary.

—Jane Satterfield, author of *Apocalypse Mix*

With *Code*, Charlotte Pence attunes both eye and ear, moving from a body in the contemporary urban to drawings on the walls of a cave in Spain. *Code* traces the death of so many—from strangers to the familiar and intimate: Evelyn McHale of the iconic Empire State Building suicide photograph, a grandfather, the poet Shira Shaiman. As Pence sequences the aftermath of loss in a chord of poems and personal essays, she also embeds Shaiman's own poems, honoring her late friend. This willful collaboration with the words of one no longer in the realm of the living results in a braiding of

grief: each piece mourns for someone lost while also documenting what goes on in and around the mortal body. At its nexus, *Code* contains a narrative featuring the voices of a father, a mother who is dying from an inherited disease, and the mother's own DNA (in a prescient turn of poetic adroitness). Never have I encountered such tenderness and scrutiny in the scientific turned elegiac. Each of us originate from unique strands of genetic code, a code "beginning what is and has always been the same story, / but with different names for different animals." Pence is capacious in her attention to life, calling on us to witness what tinkers above and below surfaces, to carry on the legacies of those lost to us.

—Diana Khoi Nguyen, author of *Ghost of*,  
a National Book Award finalist

# CODE

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**CODE**

**Note:** The poetic sequence is a work of fiction. Names, characters, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

*The word code comes from the Latin caudex, the wooden pith of a tree on which scribes carved their writing. What, then, was the caudex of heredity? What was being transcribed, and how?*

—From Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The Gene: An Intimate History*

Dedicated To Shira Shaiman  
April 1, 1971-February 24, 2014

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**I.**

The genome is only a mirror for the breadth or narrowness of human imagination.

—From Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The Gene: An Intimate History*

# Orderly

For weeks, his button. Weeks later,  
his button. Left on the bureau.  
Dust squirming into its four eyes.  
Like every annoyance, in the end,

if there ever is an end, his grew.  
His mother was of sound mind.  
Not body. He couldn't arrive in time.  
The phone call came during a walk.

His dog pulled on the dark innards  
of a flattened bird, wet with rot.  
The quiet of chewing caught  
his attention. Returning home,  
keys still needed hanging. His coat.

Leash. The button—expressionless.  
Somewhere, his mother. Of all the ways  
to go, laughing is never one of them.  
A stranger will cover her. Some nurse.

Some orderly. Is that what they're called?  
Orderlies? Meanwhile, her body, her  
bone house. Unbuttoned. Buttoned up.

# The Weight of the Sun

I like the 4 a.m. feedings best, tilting  
the rocking chair back and forth  
with my toes, observing how the invisible

lines of our dark yard rest against  
the lines of other yards—of other lives.  
Before the sun rises, this small wedge

of the world momentarily in agreement:  
everyone on this block wishing for sleep,  
for peace, for the coming day to be better

than the last. I like thinking how the grass  
growing a thousandth of an inch every  
fifteen minutes is celebrating something

as I celebrate solving small mysteries  
like learning a red fox is the one who  
flattens the path through the lawn.

Mainly I like pretending I am the only one  
awake, the only one seeing the world  
at this instant. The navy sky, thick as blood,

is my blood, as the fracture of stars, bright  
as raw bone, is my bone. I like being  
reminded that we all began in dark and stars,

that the carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen  
in our bodies was created 4.5 billion  
years ago in another generation of stars,

that somehow if we could weigh the sun,  
all rising 418 nonillion pounds of it,  
we'd see that strength is never needed

to begin the day. No, it's something else.  
Behind every square of light flipped on,  
someone is standing or slouching,

stretching or sighing, covering  
or uncovering her face. Someone  
is thinking, *Today, I will I will I will...*

# Attractions

Out of thirty-some jumpers off the Empire State, one is known as “The Most Beautiful Suicide.” Evelyn McHale. There are photos, blogs, paintings. We can appreciate the desire to imagine death as she portrays it. A swirling white scarf with the ferocity of teeth. The sudden bang. Position of deep sleep. She was one of the few ever to land whole. After ending an engagement, she decided to leap big toward nothing, avoiding all terraces and signage. Witnesses commented on how far out she jumped. Seemed grateful for that American go-for-it-ness. What’s curious, though, isn’t the limousine hood that crumpled around her like a black satin pillow, nor her crossed ankles, her gloved fingers touching her pearl necklace, but on that day, she, like the rest of us, dressed for the cold: buttoned her coat, knotted her scarf, and covered her head.

# While Reading About Semiotics

The cottonmouth charged, cleaving creek-side grass with its wet-black, whip-thick body. Not in an “S,” but more like a furious scribble, the snake thrashed toward me with its wide ghost of throat.

I had often dreamt of snakes—coiling, hissing, writhing—and woke sweat-damp wondering what it all meant. Now, the keeled-scaled viper lunged and missed, pursuing me as a dog would chase a ball.

I smiled, not at the snake, but at how the day had suddenly filled with certainty. No question over signifier and signified. No debate of snake as it honed in on my soft skin. And the why:

a meal of rock bass I had unknowingly sat beside on the bank, grey-black and deadly flat.

# To Muck and Muck and Muck

Here I am again, seeking  
something from another country.  
Transformation, aren't you  
a fist-sized bird? All claws  
and low-yield clutches. You,  
this stew of overused  
Ganges, where we ride in a boat,  
watch bodies burn on shore.  
Last to go is the rib cage.  
Belief dictates everyone cremated  
on this sacred shore goes  
to heaven, whatever the sin.  
No wonder air is thick  
with ash and grief. Floating  
candles in bamboo cradles  
outrun our boat, bob down  
this holy, septic river  
long emptied of oxygen,  
toxic to touch. A mother dips  
her hand into the waste. *Drink,*  
*my love, drink,* she demands  
of her child, limp on her lap.