Poet Jennifer Grotz reflects on place, inspiration, and the 'vocabulary' she found in a baroque French monastery.

Opening a Window

By Kathleen McGarvey

After finishing her second book, *The Needle* (Houghton Mifflin, 2011), poet and literary translator Jennifer Grotz went to the Monastère de Saorge in the French Alps. Completing the book had given her a "clean slate," she says. "My idea was just to see if poems came. But I was going to work on translations. I wasn't putting pressure on myself."

The poems came.

Grotz's newest book, *Window Left Open* (Graywolf Press, 2016), draws on her visits to the monastery over several summers. "I was so inspired by it, and that's partly why I kept going back," she says. "It was like the monastery became a kind of vocabulary for me."

Franciscans occupied the 17th-century baroque monastery, located between Nice and Turin, until 1988, when it became a writers' retreat. "They'd thought about making it into a hotel, but it was too spare," says Grotz, a professor of English. "These were tiny monks' cells. It's a mattress on a wooden plank, a desk, a window."

But for Grotz, that sparseness was liberating—even, she says, "ecstatic."

Being at the monastery is like stepping out of the modern world: there's no access to the Internet or

MOUNTAIN TIME: Tucked into the French Alps, the Monastère de Saorge is now a writers' retreat. Grotz says its spareness was liberating: "my days were long and free, and my attention span was so intensified by that freedom."

JENNIFER GROTZ (LANDSCAPE); WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (MONASTÈRE DE SAORGE)

cell phones. There's hardly electricity, or even much in the way of plumbing. Although there's enough space to house about 20 people, Grotz was never there with more than a handful of others, if even that.

"When I'd first arrive, I'd go through withdrawal, dying to check my email or get a cell phone. But after a day or two, that edge wears off. And then I felt this incredible freedom—the days were so long and free, and my attention span was so intensified by that freedom." A single day at the monastery was as productive as three days of her life back home, she says.

And the poems she wrote were unusual for her.

"When I first came back and showed drafts to my friends, they kept calling them my 'psychedelic' poems, because they're so steeped in the sensory world. There's actually nothing psychedelic about them at all. What I did was describe what was literally outside my window or in the garden."

Her book is about that openness to experience. She writes in her title piece, "Window Left Open":

All you have to do is open the window
to let the night in: then moths
effervesce in a stream
toward the lamp …

The book is divided into two parts. The darker first half is urban, quotidian, and wintry.

But the second is suffused with life in a "perpetual summer," she says, like her experience of the monastery, which is available to writers only in the warm months.

"Initially, I thought I was writing two books. I didn't see how the two went together at all," she says.

But she began to see parallels to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. She realized that her two sets of poems were "complementary, and the 'songs of innocence'—the monastery poems—were much more powerful if they were juxtaposed with the 'songs of experience.' But I flipped the order.

"It's more honest to my experience. You enter the middle time of your life, and you see the radical imperfections of society, and of modern life—that's the first half of the book. And then somehow going to the monastery soothed that and opened up a kind of optimism and beauty. It was restorative.

"There's something approaching wisdom or acceptance that being in the monastery—that pared-down existence—allowed. And that became very interesting to me, the sense of being able to convert experience back into a sort of innocence."

Grotz says her time in France has changed her as a writer. She's always been interested in imagery, in painting the physical world with words and "not just living in my head," she says. "But there I was taught such a lesson in looking, and it has made my poems more sense-drenched. I have an appetite for that now in all my poems. It developed some impulse in me."

It's an impulse she tries to pass on to her students. She asks them to describe the things they see.

"It sounds so obvious, but you'd be surprised how difficult that is. Our students are so brilliant, but they don't really give themselves permission to just describe the world.

"They think they're supposed to be philosophizing or doing something much more heady. They intellectualize even when they're supposed to be seeing. And so that's something I teach them about—looking, without your brain filtering it."

You could say she's helping them to open a window. Ⓡ

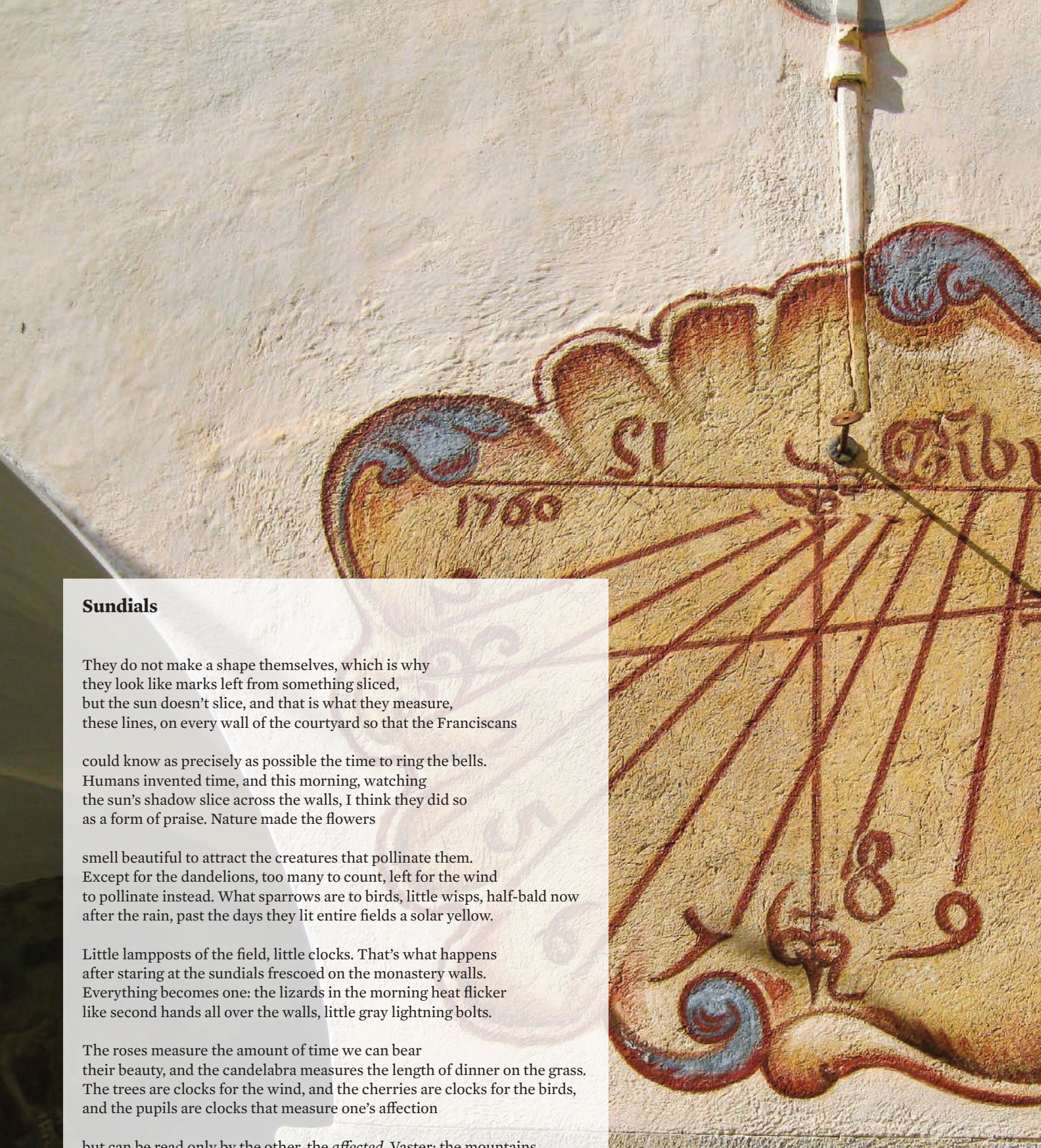
All poems are reprinted with permission from Window Left Open, *by Jennifer Grotz; Graywolf Press, 2016.*

Apricots

I judged them very carefully, as though
I'd been given the charge to determine
which are good or bad, and they were all good,
even the slightly overripe ones with bruises
had a bitter ferment that only brightened
the scent. And the too-young ones, firm
and slightly sour, not yet softened by the sun.
And the ripe ones, that felt like biting into
my own flesh, slightly carnivorous.

They had been elegant in the tree, tiny coquettes
blushing more and more until I picked them,
then they were minimalist and matte-colored
in wooden bowls, so barely furred one couldn't help
but clothe them, enclose them with your hand,
caress each one thoroughly before taking a bite,
exploring the handsome freckles left
from some minor blight.

Now I stand under the tree and
pluck them one after the other.
Each one tastes different, like a mind having
erratic thoughts. Going into the trance
halfway between eating and thinking,
the thought of an apricot, the apricot of a thought,
whose goodness occurs over time, so that
some had been better earlier, others soon
would become correct, I mean ripe.



Sundials

They do not make a shape themselves, which is why
they look like marks left from something sliced,
but the sun doesn't slice, and that is what they measure,
these lines, on every wall of the courtyard so that the Franciscans

could know as precisely as possible the time to ring the bells.
Humans invented time, and this morning, watching
the sun's shadow slice across the walls, I think they did so
as a form of praise. Nature made the flowers

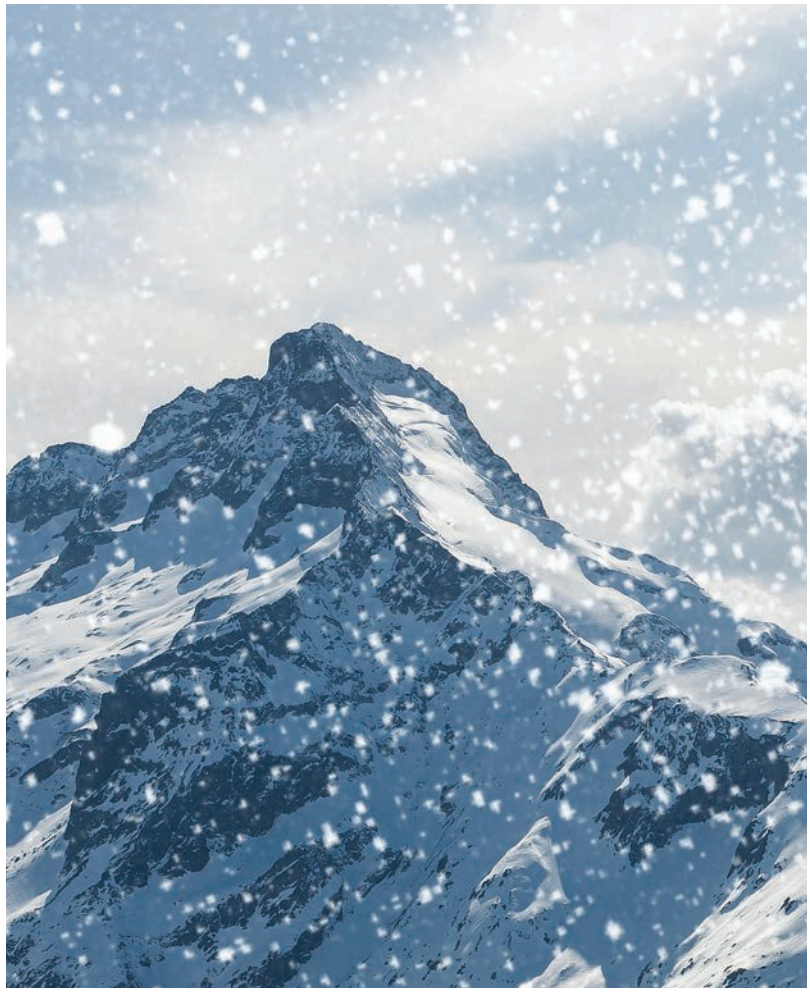
smell beautiful to attract the creatures that pollinate them.
Except for the dandelions, too many to count, left for the wind
to pollinate instead. What sparrows are to birds, little wisps, half-bald now
after the rain, past the days they lit entire fields a solar yellow.

Little lampposts of the field, little clocks. That's what happens
after staring at the sundials frescoed on the monastery walls.
Everything becomes one: the lizards in the morning heat flicker
like second hands all over the walls, little gray lightning bolts.

The roses measure the amount of time we can bear
their beauty, and the candelabra measures the length of dinner on the grass.
The trees are clocks for the wind, and the cherries are clocks for the birds,
and the pupils are clocks that measure one's affection

but can be read only by the other, the *affected*. Vaster: the mountains
measure the clouds and the dandelions in the field measure how far
the wind travels, how far it carries the seeds, while the spider
in the corner of my room is the second hand to stillness.

And the poem is a clock that measures the time and the time
it takes me to comprehend this, the time and the weather.



Snowflakes

Yesterday they were denticulate as dandelion greens, they
locked together in spokes and fell so weightlessly

I thought of best friends holding hands.
And then of mating hawks that soar into the air to link their claws

and somersault down, separating just before they touch the ground.
Sometimes the snowflakes glitter, it's more like tinkling

than snow, it never strikes, and I want to be struck, that is
I want to know what to do. I begin enthusiastically,

I go in a hurry, I fall pell-mell down a hill, like a ball of yarn's
unraveling trajectory—down and away but also surprising ricochets

that only after seem foretold. Yesterday I took a walk because
I wanted to be struck, and what happened was

an accident: a downy clump floated precisely in my eye.
The lashes clutched it close, melting it against the eye's hot surface.

And like the woman talking to herself in an empty church
eventually realizes she is praying, I walked home with eyes that melted snow.

JENNIFER GROTZ (SUNDIAL); ADOBE STOCK (SNOW)