



**Translator Susanna Nied's Introduction to *Light, Grass, and Letter in April*
*New Directions, N.Y. 2011***

A grandfather clock hovers in darkness over a snowy town. Near the pendulum, two lovers embrace; from the clock's side, a feathery wing extends. This is Marc Chagall's *Clock with Blue Wing*, which Inger Christensen touches and transmutes in the six-line poem that opens *Light*:

If I stand
alone in the snow
it is clear
that I am a clock
How else would eternity
find its way around

Light (*Lys*, 1962), the first of Christensen's six volumes of poetry, is bound here with *Grass* (*Græs*, 1963), her second volume, and *Letter in April* (*Brev i april*, 1979), her fourth. Through each volume readers can walk a little farther with Christensen as she lets eternity find its way.

Light and *Grass*, published only a year apart, may have more in common than have any of Christensen's other books. Both predate her use of complex structural systems, yet both move in increasingly experimental directions. Christensen's trademark penchant for innovative structure appears and evolves, along with her affinity for the natural world and her impulse toward synthesizing language, visual arts, and music. These poems show us the Danish landscapes that Christensen felt so much a part of; the colors, lines, and forms of works by artists she admired (Chagall, Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Asger Jorn); and the music she heard in everything from daily speech to religious liturgy to the time announcement on the telephone. Rhyme, meter, pattern, and cadence drift in and out like tides. At her early readings Christensen sang some of these poems to her own melodies, accompanied by avant-garde music. Her lifelong themes are already evident:

boundaries between self and other, between human beings and the world; our longing and struggle for direct connection beyond boundaries; the roles of language and writing as mediators of that connection; the distances between words and the phenomena that they stand for.

In a 1984 newspaper interview, Christensen reflected on *Light* and *Grass*:

"The structure of a work of art isn't usually seen as a type of philosophy. But that's how I think of it, and I believe it's been that way for me since my first book was published. It was inherent in the poetic modernism of the period. In the minuscule linguistic universe that can be created in a poem, words and images follow each other so closely that everything comes to the surface. It's like a painting where one color is here and another color is there and nothing can be taken away without everything falling apart. The exactness needed within such a small network of relationships made writing interesting. I enjoyed keeping words and phenomena in suspension in relation to each other, experiencing the way one can't hold them in one's thoughts simultaneously, yet can't keep them separate either." [Erik Skyum-Nielsen interview, 1984, *Information*]

The poems in *Light* and *Grass* do spring from the poetic modernism of their period -- the mid-twentieth century -- but they're going somewhere else. With the 1969 publication of Christensen's 230-page blockbuster *DET (IT)*, New Directions, 2006), that "somewhere else" became clear. Blending mathematics and linguistics, encompassing the fury and hope of Europe's 1968 youth revolution in the face of the sociopolitical realities of the time, Christensen's outrageous, tender, demanding *IT* bridged modernism and postmodernism, helping to catapult European poetry into a new era.

It was not until a decade later that her next volume of poetry, *Letter in April*, appeared. A complex fusion unique among Christensen's works, *Letter in April* is as quiet and understated as *IT* is bold and broad.

The *Letter in April* poems were written in collaboration with graphic artist Johanne Foss, who began their project with a series of charcoal-on-parchment drawings of Etruscan artworks and places. "The violent elements of Etruscan art fascinated me in those days," Foss recalls. Christensen and Foss had known each other for several years. Both had stayed, at one time or another, in an artists' residence (San Cataldo) near Amalfi, Italy. Both had explored Etruscan ruins. Both had studied the Etruscan collection at Copenhagen's Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek museum. Christensen, taken by Foss's images of things they both knew well, chose a set of drawings from the series and began a manuscript in response to them, folding the images into her writing. Foss continued to create drawings, feeding them to Christensen as they were completed.

Over the next two years, the project progressed. During the summer months Christensen and Foss worked from a cabin in southern Sweden while their children played together, the days long and light, wood anemones carpeting the forest. During the rest of the year they worked at their homes in Copenhagen -- again, while their children played. From her father, a tailor, Christensen had inherited a sewing machine and innumerable spools of colored thread. The children would festoon the rooms with thread, weaving it

into multicolored webs and mazes, as Christensen wrote, weaving together elements of her life and the philosophical, metaphysical, linguistic, and semiotic issues that have consistently informed her work. (Note her incorporation of Heidegger's concept of worldlessness into *Letter in April*, as well as her focus on sign systems: "Tell me / that things / speak their own / clear language").

Christensen completed an initial prose manuscript but discarded it, dissatisfied. She began again. This time a poetry manuscript emerged, a slender ribbon of short lines and simple words in verbal and visual counterpoint to Foss's drawings. Of course, the poems' apparent simplicity is deceptive. Set against the lions, gorgons, shadow landscapes and grave mounds of an Etruscan netherworld, the poems wind inward, tracing an archetypal descent into a darkness where language itself fails, a labyrinth with a monster at its core. Yet the images also include the trees, fruits and flowers of a timeless Italian summer. And the poems turn, winding back outward again, following their threads away from the labyrinth and toward everything that has been in place all along: the natural world; the languages, spoken and unspoken, of everyday tasks -- the sign systems of child-rearing, daily errands, living as one human among others -- a rebirth into light. The white anemones of northern forests appear, as do the children's thread mazes, innocuous toy labyrinths as easy to navigate as any plaything.

At another level, a more prosaic journey goes on in *Letter in April*. A woman travels with a child to a foreign country, where the two set up housekeeping for a few weeks. They experiment with a new language; meals are prepared; daily shopping is done; playgrounds are visited; excursions are made. Inger Christensen actually did travel with her young son to France to complete *Letter in April*. As she edited and interwove the poems, images from that real-life journey found their way into the manuscript as well, adding still another dimension to the duality of inner and outer worlds.

In the complex but subtle structure of *Letter in April* duality also plays a role. There are seven main sections, marked by Roman numerals I through VII. Each main section contains five subsections, marked with small circles o through ooooo, and arranged in varying order.

Section I: ooooo, oooo, o, oo, ooo

Section II: ooo, oo, ooooo, oooo, o

Section III: o, oooo, ooo, oo, ooooo

Section IV: ooooo, oo, o, oooo, ooo

Section V: ooo, oooo, ooooo, oo, o

Section VI: o, oo, ooo, oooo, ooooo

Section VII: ooooo, oooo, o, oo, ooo

Subsections with the same number of small circles have motifs in common. The double structure of sections and subsections allows the book to be read in two ways. One can read straight through I-VII, in order. Or one can read I o, II o, III o... ; then I oo, II oo, III oo...;

then I ooo, II ooo, III ooo ... and so on. The text is flexible enough that either grouping of the poems can work.

This structural flexibility arises not only from the subsections' shared motifs, but also from Christensen's instincts for mathematics and music. During the early 1970s she developed an interest in the work of French composer Olivier Messaien (1908-1992), a pioneer of serialism. Practitioners of this innovative approach to tonality rely on individual notes organized into a set, or series, that involves no guiding chord. Mathematical patterns of permutation, as opposed to a central chord, guide variations within the given series of notes, producing unified compositions that circumvent traditional tonal harmony. Christensen found literary possibilities in serialist techniques. In *Letter in April*, she applies mathematical patterns of permutation to create a regular system of variations in the order of the subsections. As she had done for *IT*, and as she later would do in an entirely different way for her 1981 *alfabet (alphabet)*, New Directions, 2001), Christensen was able to convert mathematical principle into poetry -- a poetry both visionary and grounded in the natural world, consistently transcending its own mathematical structures.

Letter in April is duality upon duality: in its visual/verbal genesis, in its musical/mathematical structures, and in its layered content incorporating the metaphysical within the prosaic. Fittingly, its first two pages also function as a double dedication. From poet to artist, a nuanced eight-line inscription in honor of their friendship and collaboration, "...our work with images, words, to bring all things back to the landscape they come from." From artist to poet, a delicate line of wildflowers from the hills of Italy.