



# The Luminous Image

***The image is an idea, a true idea,  
an earlier idea than concept.***

—Li-Young Lee

My creative journeys typically start with an image I see in the world—sometimes once, sometimes repeatedly—an image that for some reason gets under my skin. Moreover, if it later attracts other images to it, both visual and written, these images taken together may create a single entity—something larger, more complicated, more alive than the individual image alone. When this happens, I may very well have the beginnings of a new book.

In *The Glass Between Us*, the initial image was this beluga whale, seemingly floating high above the heads of aquarium visitors whose faces are reflected in the glass tank. Raising my camera, I thought to myself, *I'll get rid of that reflection*. Then I realized, *No—there's something intriguing about the relationship between the whale and the people's reflections*. I clicked the shutter. That first photograph began my exploration of the complicated relationship between people and animals in some twenty-five cities around the world.

More often than not, I photographed the captive creatures through some sort of transparent barrier, such as the glass tanks in aquariums, the specimen





cases in natural history museums, or the Plexiglas walls of the monkey houses in zoos. Sometimes when the light was right, the glass between us captured the reflection of people responding to the animals, their faces a complicated mix of wonderment and irony, delight and sadness, connection and isolation. Sometimes when the light was right, the glass between us became a window, a wall, and a mirror.

While working on *My Dakota*, an elegy for one of my brothers who died unexpectedly, I was drawn to a flock of blackbirds—thousands of them—flying through the stormy Western sky as if they were one huge, dark, ravenous creature, picking clean the remains of the sunflower fields in the last days of autumn. It didn't seem to matter how quickly I stopped the car and raised the camera to my eye. Inevitably, the dark flock vanished as soon as it had appeared.

For that entire week, I dreamed about those blackbirds. Finally, one afternoon near the small town of Gray Goose, South Dakota, I saw the flock hovering above a field of sunflowers. I climbed over the barbed wire fence, and rushed into the field, wondering what I'd say to the farmer if he caught me trespassing on his land. Then something happened that I wasn't expecting—the flock lingered. Were there more seeds than usual to feed on? Were the towering sunflowers hiding me from the skittish birds? Slowly and quietly, I inched closer, until I was standing directly behind one of the tallest sunflowers in the field. Beneath its large bowed head, I clicked the shutter again and again until the dark flock vanished once more into the cold, gray, blustery November sky. —RNW