Charlotte Hilary Matthews’s poems in *Green Stars* grow out of the supernaturalist strand of Romanticism—the dream-inspired poetry of Coleridge.

But, like Coleridge in his *Conversation Poems*, Matthews is a visionary disguised as a naturalist. The book begins with an epigraph from Annie Dower: “The world has wonderful details / if you can just get it a little closer than usual.” And Matthews, in poem after poem, gets a lot closer to the natural world than most of us, pointing out the odd but telling specifics we overlook: the way walnuts float on the water, “their insides black and porous / as marrow” (“What Floats”); the way a woman sweeps “her dust yard / into perfect swirls, the wings of a night moth” (“Lucy”); the way a street vendor “lifts radiant oranges” from an old cardboard box (“Fire and the Sun”). In these poems filled with loss and sorrow, Matthews consoles herself by knowing that she can offer the reader her strong powers of observation:

> A least, in this world, I can show you something,  
a piece of fruit or a bright jar of buttons,  
and it will be what I have said.”  
(“Letter”)

These poems also draw on delicately realized dreams. In “What I Wanted to Tell You,” Matthews announces her connection to the visionary tradition: “Just now I must wait for the voices / around me to be heard.” And she is at ease seamlessly moving from the natural to the supernatural in the same poem. In “County Airstrip” she interrupts an account of the view from a Cessna of a river and a man watching over hedgerows to tell us that

> A child dreams  
deep blue wallpaper.  
In it, birds in a marsh  
layer upon layer of color  
so steeped around them they will never have to leave.

It is not an accident that the poem begins with an epigraph from another poem that blurs the boundaries of the real and the otherworldly—*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: “How long in that same fit I lay I have not to declare.” More often than not in these poems, Matthews offers us a gauzy world in which the natural and supernatural are so artfully intermingled that we can’t always tell the real from the dream. We sometimes feel as if we are in the kitchen of Elizabeth Bishop’s “Sestina” where—just as we start to trust the stability of a grandmother, an almanac, a teakettle, and a rigid crayon drawing—the
almanac’s “little moons fall down like tears. . . into the flower bed the child / has carefully placed in the front of the house.”

Like Bishop’s child in “Sestina,” Matthews is most prone to turn to the haziness of dreams when reality is most painful. In “A Study of Gratitude,” the speaker’s response to the ongoing fighting between her brother and father is to announce that she has “lived remote, / a cloud or a piece of gauze, / something so pale it gives up its form.”

Nowhere is this need for a dream-retreat more poignant than in the book’s first section, in which Matthews circles the fact of her mother’s death. Through a Bergsonian fluidity of time as graceful as that of a Marguerite Duras novel, this cluster of poems blends the details of her present life with dreams of a life in which her mother still lives:

Sometimes I dream the back field of our house goes all the way to the river and my mother is still alive, standing by her desk, arranging her day.

(“The Feel of Water”)

Whenever I close my eyes, the house is exactly the way we left it. And the world outside is quiet, waiting for us.

(“Two Childhoods”)

In Biographia Literaria, Coleridge announces his intention to give his fantasies such a “semblance of truth” that his readers will believe in them through a willing leap of poetic faith. Like Coleridge, Matthews often insists that her dreams are real. In “Maybe That’s Who I’ll Be,” the persona recounts her dream of a field ploughed into “geometric clods the size of your fist” and then declares, “this dream really happened, and not so long ago.” When she goes on to announce that “Everything I say here is true,” Matthews seems to be calling on childlike faith to suspend her own disbelief as well as the reader’s.

In Green Stars, Matthews is not only a dream-maker but also a conjurer who knows how shapes can shift, how a scarf can transform into a dove. In “Metamorphosis,” the speaker describes making rubbings of leaves and cinder blocks, while the science teacher down the hall explains the shape-shifting of insects:

words from the science class came up to us odd and startling as their teacher explained eggs, larvae, pupa, adult. How unlike what we are doing, as we press firmly with crayon, how strange to first be one thing and then another.
In “Magic Show,” a child “nimbly holds a sparkler of light, / share of brightness, like a parcel of land, / so that what matters most becomes effortless” and proclaims that she “can change a person’s life / by saying just one thing, just once.”

While the world’s malleability fascinates Matthews, her persona also confesses, “I am bewildered / by the shape of things around me” (“What I Wanted to Tell You”). In “Blowing Glass” she seems saddened that the inevitable metamorphosis of the world is beyond the control of her magician’s powers:

To shape even
the simplest
form in glass
is a constant fight
against the will
of gravity.
Look at an old window:
how it sags,
how glass is the thickest
at the bottom.

Perhaps the greatest heartbreak of the collection comes when the speaker admits that

I want my mother to draw me a tall
house on a hill, or a kitchen
table, something solid
that can bear its own weight.
(“Bottom of the Ocean”)

“Kubla Khan” opens with Coleridge’s recollection of his Xanadu dream already interrupted and the poet ostensibly scrambling to recover what he can. When *Green Stars* begins, the mother’s death, like a stranger’s knock, has already scattered the dreams of a world where mothers keep living and childhood houses never change. Matthew has been be quick to capture these imaginings, knowing, as Coleridge does, that such visions will not stay.