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Above paradise

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ABOVE PARADISE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Lara Gularte

December 2006

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ABSTRACT

ABOVE PARADISE

by Lara Gularte

This thesis poetry collection contains stories about my Portuguese pioneer family who settled in the Scott Valley near Fort Jones California beginning in the mid 1800s to early 1900s. They came for gold but turned eventually to ranching becoming more personally connected to the land. A major theme in the collection concerns the importance of landscape as connection to historical and cultural legacy.

The collection is largely composed of narrative poems written in free verse about the experiences of Portuguese immigrants in this little known area of California. Many of the poems are clustered around the theme of the poet/speaker searching for her family history at her ancestral home place. The family members who could tell the speaker about her history are all dead and buried and she must look not only to her own memories, but to the land where her family once lived for answers.

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Preface

My poetry collection titled "Above Paradise" contains stories about my Portuguese pioneer family who settled in the Scott Valley near Fort Jones California beginning in the mid 1800s to early 1900s. Gold was discovered in Siskiyou County around 1850, and large numbers of Portuguese emigrated to the Siskiyou mountain area of Northern California to hunt for gold. This area of California was called the "Portuguese mining capital" by 1880. My great grandmother came to Fort Jones as a mail order bride during this period and today her homestead remains a local landmark.

The importance of landscape connecting the legacy of history and culture is a major theme in the collection. Not long ago people lived intimately with the land, setting roots deep in place depending upon land and their knowledge of it for physical and psychological sustenance. We are drawn to a place because of the stories the landscape encloses, the memories it holds, or the beauty that calls us back again and again.

The poems in the collection are written in free verse and mainly in the narrative. Many of the poems describe the experiences of Portuguese Immigrants who settled in this part of California. In the search for her ancestors, the poet/speaker travels to her ancestral home place. When the speaker discovers that all her family is dead and buried, she looks to the land where they lived for answers. In the poem "At the Village of Santa Barbara, Island of Pico; Looking for My Great, Great Grandmother, Maria Francesca de Cabral" the speaker is literally scraping at lava stones to find her past: "My fingernails scrape lava stones, / loosen dust."

In the poem "Fifty Years Later" the speaker goes back to her great grandmother's homestead, where she spent time as a young girl only to find a now abandoned ranch in a dilapidated condition. Here the speaker loses faith in her search:

No one at the window waves.
A hawk lies dead on the front porch,
A wasp nest above the door.
Kneeling, I crack twigs and pray hard
to remember where I came from.
Why I came.

Many of the immigrants who settled in the Scott Valley area turned eventually from gold prospecting to ranching becoming more personally connected to the land. The theme of life, death and rebirth dominates the collection. In the poem "The Immortals" the speaker goes so far as to liken the hi-way through the valley as a birth canal:

Sunlight over corpses
hollowed by decay
bones as body of the rock
of the land,
a history of how
grasses move
blade by blade.
Hi-way 3
through Scott valley

a birth canal
for another way
to be born
to life and death.

The geography of place and the speaker's intimate connection with the land gives her a sense of connection to the former inhabitants promising that they will not be forgotten. To find her own identity, the speaker must discover that man and nature are inseparable. She explores how the natural landscape is linked to the essence of human existence both physically and spiritually.

The theme of faith and divinity in the natural world can be found throughout this poetry collection. My thesis poems borrow techniques from the lyrical voice and narrative works of Robinson Jeffers. His ability to write about the relationship between humanity and nature describing his own pantheistic sense of nature. Jeffers writes:

The parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks and stars;
none of them seems to me important in itself, but only the whole. This
whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in
earnest, that I am compelled to love it, and to think of it as divine.

Jeffers is able to represent the complete relationship between humanity and nature. Tor House his Carmel home, as well as the Carmel/Big Sur seacoast itself, with its hunting hawks, possessed and spoke through him in his writing.

For Jeffers spiritual reality was incarnate in the natural world. In nature, he sensed the unity of all existence with the universe as a whole. His spiritual belief he describes this way:

I believe that the Universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of the deeper sort love and there is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of salvation, in turning one's affections outward toward this one God, rather than inwards on one's self, or on humanity, or on human imaginations and abstractions—the world of spirits.

In the Section called "Crossings," the speaker discovers that man and nature are interchangeable and that after death there is rebirth. She finds landscapes that exist beyond the ones you can see. In the poem "The Crossing Over" the speaker floats with a fish down the river each one taking on parts of each other's physicality in an effort to survive different natural environments: "The creature lurches, and together / We float over the silted bed / the granite rocks."

In the poem "To Become Holy," "Pale flowers sprout the dead / back to life."

"The Cellar" describes the speaker climbing down into dark depths only to find "an old world on shelves."

When the speaker is surprised by gray moths that try to communicate with her, she frees them from their darkness: "I shove open the cold pane / release wings into the world."

In a number of my poems, William Wordsworth's descriptions of nature and the spiritual effects of natural scenery are clearly influential. Wordsworth describes nature as a place of refuge. In his poem, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," Wordsworth enables the reader to drift and wander like a cloud as part of nature. His vision of daffodils lessens the feelings of loneliness and is a comforting image: "And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils."

It seems that for Wordsworth nature is comforting; nature is undying and always returns. Wordsworth's influence in my work can be seen in many of these poems, including "The Shooting of Manoel Cardoza Portuguese Immigrant May 29, 1888,"

Manoel floated
from this life to the next,
in the mountain stream that fed his fields.

Today the blood of the immigrant
made of mountain mud
soaks animal paths,
old Indian trails.

His veins lead into thick forest.

Find him,

the throb of water

in McAdams creek.

In the section called “Last of Her Line,” some of the speaker’s pioneer ancestors who lived in Scott valley are portrayed as people who had the endurance to fulfill their destinies. Humanity’s relationship to the land and the cycles of life and death dominate these poems. In “Last of Her Line” death and rebirth occur almost simultaneously. A pioneer woman who has outlived all her family lies down in the grass to die and hears seeds splitting:

The snake tenses its muscles

as she waits for her world to begin

on the other side of cold grass.

She can almost hear seeds splitting

in the dark loam.

It’s final,

It’s a beginning.

By the end of this section “The Widow Silva” is a testament to pioneer endurance when after burying her husband she shoots his old and failing horse and with daylight to spare finishes the ranch chores: “And it’s time to take corn to the hens, / turn the bull out to the cows, / check for leaning fences.”

The poetry of Chitra Divakaruni, which tells stories about Indian immigrants in America, has also had a thematic influence on my work. Her use of domestic landscapes such as a mother's kitchen, or a rural schoolroom draws her readers to the inner landscape of the South Asian woman's psyche. In her poem "Yuba City School,"

The books are full of black curves,
dots like eggs that boil-weevil lays
each monsoon in furniture-cracks
in Ludhiana. Far up in front
the teacher makes word-sounds
Neeraj does not know. They float
From her mouth-cave, he says,
in discs, each a different color. <33> Black Candle

Divakaruni's bi-cultural perspective and depth of feeling make the world of the South Asian woman accessible to all who are unfamiliar with it. She is able to intertwine the sense of the immigrant woman's experience with the pains and joys of the ordinariness of women's lives, making her poetry recognizable to all readers irrespective of culture. She does this by using language which is intense, imagistic and compressed.

"Kitchen Dreams" a poem about a woman in a loveless marriage who literally lives in the domestic landscape of her own kitchen, is influenced by Divakaruni's work: "She sleeps on a cot in the kitchen. / Like a cat she watches him in the dark, / Her teakettle hissing a warning."

My poem, “Ghost of Mary Prada,” a monologue spoken by an immigrant woman who comes to California as a mail order bride only to die in childbirth, also draws its narrative directness from the straight forward stories told by Divakaruni’s immigrant narrators: “A priest mumbles the rosary, / my Joe looms above me, / his hands at his sides, big and useless.”

The section called “Saving Myself focuses on the speaker’s continued search for her past and identity. In the poem “California Bride 1879,” the face of the speaker’s great grandmother floats in the poem’s speaker’s dreams:

The face of Maria Neves
floats in my dreams.
She was my great grandmother.
I wear her eyes,
speak in her voice.

In “Hiking in the Shasta-Trinity Forest” the speaker hikes an introspective divide between the summit and herself:

sunlight traces
a path
through pines,
a divide
between
the summit and myself.

Resolution for the speaker in her search for her past and identity comes with the final poems in the collection. The poems “What matters is the morning” and “Saving Myself” affirm the speaker’s life in the present. The last poem, “Saving Myself” constitutes the speaker’s resolution of her search:

I rise from the cold, moving current,
find shallow water,
and sit among the stones.

In a mountain pool
where a trout darts

I bless my reflection.

The speaker sits among the “stones,” (her ancestors) with the acceptance of her own life and the awareness that she is part of the earth’s process of being.

The narrative aesthetic that is evident in my collection stems the influences of Divakaruni, Jeffers, and Wordsworth. Among poems in the collection, “The Rancher’s Wife” is most clearly influenced by Divakaruni, “Silence of the Mountain” is most clearly influenced by Jeffers, and “Leaves” is most clearly influenced by Wordsworth. In poems such as these, the speaker in the poems must resurrect her pioneer ancestors from the very ground where they are buried in order to know who they were and who she is. In exploring the geography of her family history the speaker develops a personal relationship with the landscape and comes to discover that the land remembers. The home place of her ancestors embraces myth, legend, fact and folklore communicating a physical and cultural legacy. A people can return again to tell their tales.

Crossings

Journey

Years of lift and scrape,
slip and crack,
the Siskiyou mountains.
My gold hunter ancestors
haunt the ridge,
darken the slope.
See them rise,
hear the thunder of the peaks.
A blackbird passes above
to where the world
moves over the horizon,
the upper air,
thinness beyond breath,
shifting bodies,
many voices.
With beating wings
they slip away,
and the sun runs cold in Scott valley
where a frozen bird lies,
and seeds sleep uneasily,
unsure of their time.

The Immortals

Highway 3 through Scott Valley
birth canal for another way
to be born.

The valley its weedy edges
alive with snakes and bugs
In the presence of stones
I feel the embrace of moss
the shape of my future in the fern's face

A deluge of light
laps against my feet
floods the Fort Jones cemetery
Sunlight over corpses hollowed by decay
bones as body of the rock, of the land

I stand somewhere between
the seen and the unseen
Mortal as the earth
stranded in the present
I hurry myself to the highway.

Cleansing

1

Monarchs do not fly here,
nor does the yellow mustard grow.
No trees for birds to nest,
only streets
where men in long cars push
through jammed avenues.
Officials inspect wind
trapped in pillars,
examine the river
thick with lead and sludge.

2

In my home with no ceiling
I find lacework, the smell of mothballs
in my hope chest.
My grandmother weeps down
from the sky.
Tears flood my house,
swim in my ribcage,
drum on my heart.

All night
I feel the slippery body of water.
Seeds fall from my eyes.
In the morning I rise
with liquid hands.
When I shake them out
they turn green.
Blackbirds perch on them.

The Cellar

Past the every day
kitchen cabinets,
stainless steel appliances,
a descent into darkness.
My flashlight a yellow eye
unable to see beyond
a thin stream of illumination.
Hands feel along walls
to find the switch.
A forty -watt bulb
reveals an old world
arranged on shelves.
Amber vials, dusty canning jars,
brim with mold.
In the corner piecework quilts,
graying dolls recline.
Unfamiliar faces in old photographs,
deeds to places that no longer exist
in a cardboard box.
Smudged against the dirty window
moths the color of ash
rise up against the ceiling,
then back down to tag the bulb.
To get my attention
they circle above me
wings clapping.
They flutter against my chest,
tickle my ears.
I shove open the cold pane
release wings into the world.

Summertime Passing

The flies I killed
with my swatter this summer
haunt me.

Nights I can't sleep,
I rescue moths.
They flop around my lantern.
Gathering them in a tablecloth,
I watch them flutter toward the moon.
The ones I can't save,
litter the porch like leaves.

This morning I cross
the Fort Jones cemetery
leading to my family plot.
I place poppy seeds on the stones,
the shadow of a hawk
rumples over the grass.

Clouds are being pulled
apart by the wind,
there is something about
their torn white mouths,
like the dead
who will take my hands some day,
when I will rise,
like a wave out of the hot field.

The Crossing

No one walks the cattle path now, no one but the cows.
I follow tracks deep in the ground, sink into spring ooze
where several layers down
lie those who cultivated this land.
In the soft ticking of weeds
I hear singing,
harmonies I do not understand.
The wind hisses the names of the dead,
and from a clover bed, with no wings or halos,
they rise up to walk the pasture.

When a hawk drifts down, hooked claws extended,
my feet crush lupines and buttercups.
I run towards Moffett Road.
From an oak a shadow of birds explodes,
and the air hums with souls.
No breath
I reach paved road and walk towards town.
Ranchers wave when I pass
as though I have forgotten something,
as though I should turn back.

Times of Sorrow

and times of relief
the heated death rooms
of the elders'
eternal bulk
makes me sit
not move
becoming
their monument.

Candles
open coffin eyes
the dead pull away
from their bodies
move
between slats
of venetian blinds

Outside the window
a sudden tearing of wind
as they rise up
over the blue oak.

Leaves

I long for those birds,
clouds of ducks and geese
their flight home
myself bound to earth,
to these mountains.

I watch leaves
drop
one by one,
the distance between now
and my future shortens.

This November, dappled
with drizzle and dropped clouds.
It's the leaves that fill me,
the damp that gnaws
the long merging shadows.

I believe what thunder says,
see with my own eyes
the spaces between the leaves
fill with light.

Early December

Uncertain sunlight
the past
a hidden place.
This heart
a floating eye
drifts
from room to room.
In the attic
my history.
Night things are awake
watching.
I hang outside myself
like a bat,
under my head
the drop.

Without Horizon

Sun drops
below the sugar pine.
Snow falls—
the world moves out of focus.
Directions disappear,
no trace of foot or paw.
Without edges
I am somewhere
between the place
I began
and the place
I will end.
Out of the cottonwood
a bitter sigh.
The lone call
of a late--
migrating bird.
The sky darkens.

In cold solitude
I wait
for virgin earth
to be discovered
again.

Looking for a Sign

Frosty mornings shimmer,
winds swirl the days shorter,
and the cold keeps me moving
through darkness,
to find sun.

When the wood of my front door swells it stuck,
I tuck myself in bed and eat canned peaches,
Inhale the smoke of pine-scented candles,
and wonder what it is I believe in.

The homeless and the frauds
huddle in churches,
and granddad sinks deeper
into the center of the house,
I hibernate,
and ignore sudden storms,
mildew in the shower.

On Solstice day I search the pale sky,
look for a light.
By midnight,
Christmas neon outshines stars.
I stoke the Franklin stove
and strain to smell the charred sweetness
of an afterlife.

Awakened by Geese

The December sky so clear
I can almost see through it.
My dream last night
of flying,
of leaving the body's struggle.
With a crack of gunfire
morning opens
to the flutter of trees,
of feathers into air.
The sky fills with honking birds.
I am deaf to their fear
as I watch them
disappear over the edge
where spirit loses
touch with matter.

Ghosts of the Siskiyou

Night emerges from under a hawk's wings,
from the deep roots of the land,
where rodents thrive close to the earth.

Darkness lurks behind the waterfall,
and under stones gazing up at me
with half faces.

Leaves of the California oaks
their branches sag,
touch the ground.

The moon walks the ridge.
It glimmers on the hillside,
calling the dead out of the stony soil.

In the lunar light
I watch them rise
slowly into the sky.

I sleepwalk among low clouds,
sing with coyotes on a mountain trail,
listen to my voice carry back to me.

At the top of the mountain,
the moon gets stuck in a frozen sky-
then the stars break out.

I sing louder, wanting my voice
to be heard
and not come back.

In the Woods at Night

Shadows move in
light falls to the ground.
Colors fill up the darkness
clots of red, spasms of purple.
My eyesight dims.
Deer trail sinks into canyon.

When night comes alive
it hums, it crawls.
I can hear the deep dead turn,
see roots bulge up from the dirt.
Eyes shine on me
a wet nose touches my hand.

Unwinged, human
I want to save myself from danger
but with no sharp beak or claws
I can't protect myself
from hungry raptors
a world that gets up on all fours.

In the open meadow
hooves find ground.
Over and over
animals knock on the earth,
leave no tracks.

I follow a thin moon
find new life
in the dry creek bed.
I move slowly over a log
my legs reborn,
my claws deep in the wood.

Crossing Over

The air thick with pine and pitch
my reel spins, rod bends,
line goes taut.
A pink mouthed trout flies from the water
and lidless eyes go to sky.

The creature lurches, and together
we float over the silted bed,
the granite rocks.

Then a silver blue flaps on the river bank,
gasps land's atmosphere.
Gills seal and appendages grow.

I swallow the wooly worm,
and the world becomes a river in me,
my eyes the reflection of birds flying.

From the dead, great grandfather
calls to me,
tells me to go home
to my backyard animals,
turning tame.

Gray Lodge in January

White wings, black-tipped,
shine in fog shrouded fields.
Snow-geese, calling and stirring.
Their need for this place,
my need for this place.
Feathers unfold, lift off.
The sky turns restless
and winged.
Memory of being
where distances don't exist,
like the moment before life
to be reborn
or to fly.

I Wake Ruby Throated

Drafts shimmer a humming
through the broken pane.
Wings beat against time.
Blur of pastel
near the window cornice.

Long beak stills,
pressed wings come to rest,
dead weight
a silent sway.
Whirr of two worlds.

Last of Her Line

Last of Her line

She follows ghost ruts of extinct wagon roads,
finds her husband, her mother, her baby.
They make their way single file
along the night trails of her memory.

Bent to the ground with age,
with the death of everyone she knows,
she walks slowly over the pasture.
Near a stand of oaks
through vein work of branches,
the sky sends signals to her eyes.

In a field wrapped by barbed wire
where death perches on fence posts
she goes down on her knees,
with the wild mustard and gopher holes.

The snake tenses its muscles
as she waits,
on the other side of cold grass.

The Shooting of Manoel Cardoza
Portuguese Immigrant May 29, 1888

Killed for water
standing in his own alfalfa field
red faced with work.

The gunshot crashed down the mountain
and up the other side,
rattling back through the valley.

The sound and the jerk,
shoulders collapse
his body folds,
then crumples.

He lay curled on the ground
dirt pressed against his face,
his body gored
by tiny horns of sprouting grass.

Shot in the back by Charles Davidson,
son of James Davidson
first white baby born in Fort Jones
who grew to manhood
greedy for water rights.

Manoel floated,
from this life to the next,
in the mountain stream that fed his fields.

Today an immigrant's blood,
made of mountain mud
soaks animal paths,
old Indian trails.
His veins lead into thick forest.

Find him,
the throb of water
in McAdams creek.

They Meet at a Chamarrita

The port, dark and sweet, the swirling light of dance,
his loosened damp collar, her gray skirts, unfolding.
Wrists and hands, the need to touch.
The room rises and falls with their hastening breath.

Spring clutches the plum blossom,
the girl leaves her father for the marriage bed.
Behind pulled curtains,
he watches her undress, her body edged in darkness.
They breathe in the night fragrance of spruce and pine,
wild lupine.
Through half-shut eyes, she is calm and does not speak.

Under his hands, her heart,
like a bird's muffled flutter.
Skin hums, and slender thighs press closer.
Shadows walk above their heads.
They rustle and toss,
till light seeps through the window.
Still, they linger on the paling sheets,
halfway familiar, halfway strange.

The Rancher's Wife

She raises the shades to dark trees
and glowing fields of wheat and pasture.
She opens windows
to the fragrance of honeysuckle,
the sharp smell of manure.

Through the kitchen pane
she watches as his calloused hands
lift bales of hay into air.
She opens the screen door,
puts her hands in his,
pulls him inside.

She undresses for him,
rolls her nylons down around her ankles,
removes heart-shaped lace and girdle,
shows him her olive thighs.

She rubs oil in his cracked palms,
removes splinters,
then waits for whatever
his hands will give her.

All night there is intimacy
under a yellow lamp.
At 6:00AM she's calm and slow,
lighting the woodstove
measuring the pour of milk,
the breakfast, ready to serve him.

Ghost of Mary Prada

1

I come from an island of stones
to marry Joe.
In Pico,
stones on top of the land, underneath it
overflowing into the ocean.
With bare hands I claw through stones
to find the earth.

2

At my wedding I dance the Chamarrita
with Joe.
A glass of red wine, then another,
my shawl, a heap on the floor.
We sleep good on an iron bed
with a big mattress.

3

Here in California cherries, apricots,
prunes are plucked loose from limbs,
sound of fruit striking the bottoms of buckets.
I grow vegetables;
Beet hearts, potatoes curled like pale grubs.
I milk cows, churn butter,
can fruits in tin cans sealed with wax,
make soups of kale or cabbage,
a shriveled onion, a dried bean.
I pound dough into loaves.
Big with a baby,
I sit in the evening with my crocheting,
let the orchard come through the window.

4

When my boy breaks through me
blue and silent,
a stain seeps
red and sticky on the sheets.
The midwife bends over me,
dips a towel into a bucket of hot water.
Lying on my side, I can see out the window
the apple trees stretch over the hill.
A priest mumbles the rosary,
my Joe looms above me,
his hands at his sides, big and useless.

Continued with a break

Ghost of Mary Prada (Continued)

5

Joe can't sleep nights, the bedsprings creak,
first one side, then the other.
The two stones on the grassy hill,
men in starched clothes,
women dressed in black
faces wet behind their veils.
The smell of wilting roses,
paper flowers,
crowns and wreaths.

Festa do Espirito Santo

Maria Silveira
studies the stained glass,
the lambs and saints.
She kneels and bows,
the host fusing to her tongue
the holiness of her sex,
a scent of blossoms.

A day to be the heroine,
to be the Queen, St. Isabel.
Curls wound from rags cascade her back.
A mother-of-pearl crucifix from *avo*,
the long gown of satin and crocheted
lace from her mother's garment bag.
Beneath her dress, a field of flowers.

She glides down the aisle and onto the street,
a halo of glittering crown and velvet cape.
Side maids and sign bearers,
little queens wrapped in frothy lace
with missing front teeth flank her.
Along the boulevard they float
like angels without bodies
who wear white dresses.

Sweet seller ladies of the Altar Society
offer malasadas, plump and sugared.
Women balance baskets of sweet bread
sway to the music of the brass band.
Then comes the sopas,
a feast for all, of mint flavored stew
with meat that falls easy from the bone.

When Uncle Louie Dies

Uncle Louie complains of pains,
sharp lights that come and go.
Greased with salve
his chest shakes,
and he coughs blood.

Every night he dies,
every morning he rises.
The sun finds its way
inside his window
holds him to the light,
till his body goes mute.

His wife May
builds him a grave,
dreams a great mound.
While her red hens sleep
yolks shriek inside their shells.
She gathers all the eggs in her arms,
rocks them in her apron.

Roan

The black mare trots out of the barn
to pasture in the meadow near the Neves ranch.
She searches for the stallion.
The roan that bucked off the Neves boy.
Flung him to the ground, then ran off to the woods.
Her stallion, wild somewhere, and hungry.
The mare remembers how he leaped
for apples.
Trembling, sweet fruit, on the bough
so low a horse could reach them.
The moon lifts into the cleft of the mountain,
as the old barn door creaks in the wind
and hawks cry overhead,
then dive.

Wash Day

Cook-starch steams on the woodstove,
a tin bucket of well-water ready for boil.
Crocheted lace soaks in a tub.

Face in a squint, lips a steady line,
her wet and glistening fingers
rub linens against washboard ribs.

See her near the corn patch,
braided hair turning white,
in a cotton-meal sack dress.

Clothes clapping on the line,
pillow slips billowing around her head,
like clouds.

Kitchen Dreams

Before she lives in the kitchen,
she sleeps with him in the bedroom.
They make children to love,
because they can't love each other.
He knows nothing about women,
and doesn't want to learn.
She holds her yearnings inside,
yearnings that can't feed his hunger.

She sleeps on a cot in the kitchen.
Like a cat she watches for him in the dark,
her teakettle hissing a warning.
She cooks him venison stew,
he runs his hunting knife across the oak table.
The years get lost in a dark corner
where silverfish live and are happy.

Heart Condition

It's an old story,
a sailor on leave.
For a while she receives his letters.
Years later she's still looking for her heart.
She wants it back.
Searches for it in old love songs.
Hunched over in bad light
she devours romance novels
like sugar cookies.

She sprays the door knob with cologne,
wears a wool nightgown trimmed in lace,
and waits for her favorite romance hero.
She dreams he will pull her to him,
push his tongue deep in her mouth,
massage her chest till it pulses.

Her hero doesn't show up,
and the moon shines like melted ice through the window.
Her house is heated, but doesn't get warm.
She lies in her empty bed afraid to die loveless,
Afraid she will turn into a pile of wool,
be eaten by moths.

Aunt Lucy

She is someone at the end
of a raspy voice,
a handful of tiny bones.
I was a child
when her husband left,
children grew and scattered.
I remember the angry shine
of her kitchen floor,
faded yellow dishes.
I used to hide in her cellar,
among rats and dirty jars.

The years have shaped her
into a hunched shadow,
covered her in dark wool.
When she shakes your hand
she does not let go.
Some nights she cries for her mother,
wants to be rocked to sleep.
Her hens still lay eggs each day
in old shit and straw.
Soon she will choose the egg
that will be her last meal,
before she breaks open.

The Widow Silva

She buried his ashes
then planted a tree in them.
Nights she sleeps on a cold mattress.

Today she sits on the porch
in her new chair from Sears
peeling apples.

Her husband's old mare
leans against the fence
heaves and coughs,
nose in the dirt.

She pushes against gravity
rises from her rocker.

Gray Sally follows her easy,
limps out to pasture
trails her along the cow path.

Eyes sharp and wild,
the crack of a rifle.
The widow leaves the mare
where she falls.
Leaves her for the wolves.

Back at home,
the apples are turning brown.
And it's time to take corn to the hens,
turn the bull out to the cows,
check for leaning fences.

Grandfather

You go during one winter of wilderness.
The years have flattened your grave with the earth,
wind wiped your name from the granite stone.

You had woods and weather,
rising bluffs and arching sky,
mountains that lift clear to the ocean.
The apple orchard you set on the green hill.
Sons and daughters all born
at your old mountain home.

You worked year after year,
plowing back and forth with your shaggy maned horse,
clans of birds, tribes of beasts in the forest.
I can see you working cattle since daybreak
then home by nightfall, supper and sleep.

No tree, or stone, or fence, the same,
since you left.
The brown barn leans like an animal,
the apples are small and bitter.
Hungry deer straggle in leaving bits of hide
on barbed wire.

I remember your promise of a hike in the woods,
a swim in the pond, the trout we might catch.
In dreams, you tell me to rake the dead stalks,
clean the earth bare again, scatter the wild grass.

Saving Myself

Azorean Sea Tale

When she sees him
on the beach near Lages,
he looks at her,
then toward the ocean,
then back at her.

She leads him
to the hidden cove
and they swim with the dolphins.
A fire burns through their eyes.
They lie in the sand
their lips wet,
their terror
an uncontrollable joy.

One day his boat doesn't return.
She finds no message from him
in the roar of the conch shell,
braces herself
against crashing waves.

She remembers stories
of men in dangerous seas
buoyed to shore by dolphins.
When she visits the cove
the dolphins plunge into the water
like tear drops.

**At the Village of Santa Barbara, Island of Pico;
Looking for My Great, Great Grandmother, Maria Francesca do Cabral**

My fingernails scrape lava stones,
loosen dust.
Back one hundred years and out to sea,
drowned ones stir in their kelp beds.

Looking for the other world
I find a fissure in the earth that leads
to where the sea tosses its wet creatures,
their lungs exhaling.

The ocean spreads dark and cold beneath the night,
reaches with every wave
for drops of light shed by the moon,
a radiance where unfathomed fish glow.

Musty air and a ghost rattle through banana leaves
you rise up, bones of family architecture, luminous.
A woman without soil, you carved roots
from stones of the island.

Into the Azorean sea you dive.
The splash of your body, and I jump,
scattering stars, to pull towards you.
Where ocean and sky meet, you vanish.

Your memory, the afterlife dissolving
all that salt
seeping back into the sea
an ocean mist without end.

I hold my breath, hear the heartbeat of waves,
feel the ocean of my blood.
My body takes pleasure in forgetting gravity,
the need for breathing on my own.

I ask God to throw me a line.
Floating to the shore I feel the pull of the universe
slow everything down, to where heaven pulls the earth
into its arms.

California Bride; 1879

Bones half-grown, she rises
from a ship's dark hold.
Gives herself up
to a hard-handed miner,
and grows thin from miscarriage,
fat from pregnancy.
Sings songs in Portuguese
as she hurries from cabin to sluice box
on small calloused feet.

I remember the old woman,
not the girl.
A widow in black,
with thick stockings, heavy shoes.
Lived in the corner
of my grandmother's kitchen
gluing broken dishes.
Always moving and praying.
Boiled her own egg
till the day she died.

The face of Maria Neves
floats in my dreams.
She was my great grandmother.
I wear her eyes,
speak in her voice.
She is waving her hands,
reshaping the air
to tell me in broken English,
that "life is no sugar."

50 Years Later

I am the girl who wandered away,
grown now.
I walk down the hill,
the house rises to meet me.
Fifty years ago the Neves ranch,
barn and stock, a brood of children.
This is where they lived.
My great grandfather set these boundary fences,
planted these posts.

The well is dry now,
the creek diverted.
I remember falling into Moffett Creek,
the long arms that pulled me out,
dried me off.
Since the ranch fell vacant
dead stalks mat the ground,
milkweed floats from unworked fields.

The barn, with its dead wood,
let pigeons leap through cracks,
streaks and shadows that vanish into sky.
Wind swings the door
for spirits who ghost up from the field.
I hear them low,
generations of cattle fattened then butchered.

The old house leans toward the road.
I wait for someone to open the door,
show me the dust where my mother was born.
No one at the window waves.
A hawk lies dead on the front porch,
a wasp nest above the door.
Kneeling, I crack twigs and pray hard
to remember where I came from.
Why I came.

150 Years After Gold was Discovered in California

I look for my pioneer ancestor
in the Siskiyou mountains.
I walk where he walked,
hope to see how he saw it.
Find only his marker
in the same ground,
that was supposed to give him gold.

He turns in his grave,
tries to tell me his story.
He breaks through his chest,
and stories begin to fly out of his mouth.
I run from this hard luck ghost.
his shadow chasing me down trail.

I leave behind deserted mine shafts,
ground pockmarked by holes.
I find cougar pads, cloven hooves.
A meadow springs back underfoot,
barely leaves my tracks.

The sun holds it all together
and my world dissolves into another time.
I hear miners curse sludge that clogs
rockers and sluice boxes.
I hear picks and shovels,
smell kerosene and horses,
see ghosts of men in a crouch,
some on their knees in mud.

On the Scott River,
someone yells "Eureka",
and fish jump away from the water,
rocks tremble.

Mushroom Woods

Evergreen forests
offer their leaves,
and below the surface of this world
mushrooms hide,
wait for the right moment.
A cold dry season
then warm winds, rains
bring forth mycelium masses
that rise up to claim the forest floor.
In darkened thickets
where leaf mat covers ground
they thrust upward,
push through leaves and soil,
explode into moist clumps
to spread spores, seed-like hopes
of future species—
Red Russulas with chalk-white stripes
and spongy brown *Boletus*.
Yellow globe of *Witch's Butter*,
the faint lavender of *Blewitts*.
Slice a red-pored *Bolete*
and its flesh turns blue.
There is risk in naming,
danger in misnaming,
and a short time
to hunt them
before the first frost.

To the Mountain

He puts on his boots and starts walking
into dark thickets with his guns and gear.
He wades in cold waters.
Ferns blaze up along the banks,
trout glint in the shallows of the Sacramento.

The wood springs wild against his world,
stags rut in the meadow
and a great white owl
rises silent, satiated
the forest path still warm.

Wolves wait in granite caves
sniffing the pale winds.
He climbs
feeling the earth shudder,
the deep down ache.

His body rises up the mountain
where he sees obsidian faces,
hears the slow grind of bedrock
and cross-sections of himself fall away,
like chunks of glacier crashing into Shasta Lake.

After the Storm

The Scott River,
its waters course by in flood
dragging trunk and limbs.
Tree roots hold on to memory,
the cold hand of a pioneer woman.
She drowned herself
choosing water and eternity.
Underneath, a shape swims
pale, amorphous,
then sinks
into the dark bed.
I look deep,
focus changes to sky
and I shiver
to see my face
among the moss,
awake with its own light.

Haunting

Three generations,
their fados cry out to me
as I sleep.

At the Fort Jones cemetery
bodies turned to old bones,
want to rise into air.

I pull them from the soil,
bloodlines lost,
found.

They lift again into life
gold hunters, sun burnt women,
babies not yet weaned.

In dark waters of the Scott River
fish silver up
through shafts of light.

In the Shasta Trinity Forest

Backpack
presses to shoulders,
trail bends
then rises.
Sunlight traces
my path
through pines,
a divide
between
the summit
and myself.
From a jagged body
of basalt
the remembered hiss
of ash.
Upper snow,
the mountain
ground shifts
beneath me.
I pull myself up by vine,
by trunk.
Roots tear loose,
give way.
A stream of rocks
plunges downward.
My pulse races.
A woodpecker
drills into pine.

Silence of the Mountain

At the edge
of the canyon
level with the sky
and a wide-seeing hawk,
I watch butterflies
catch an updraft,
listen
for the grind,
the shift
of tectonic plates.
Beneath my feet
entombed
ancient seashells,
perfect eggs,
animals, extinct.
In my hand
a chunk of magma,
I seek to carve
my life from
this huge expanse,
hear again
the old voice
from the mute summit,
outrun
the boiling mudslide.

A Small Destiny

Sky ragged with shadow.
Every leaf on the oak
an apparition.
Bare twigs point
toward the earth
in warning.

Red-tail circles the yard,
hovers on air and light,
pitched cry of hunger,
the dive for sweet flesh,
talons into soft tissue.

The feral kitten
motionless under the heart
of the hawk's body.

The sudden tearing of wind,
branches wave,
light bends.
The kitten lifted
out of its life.
The earth growing smaller,
more distant.

Finding the Sacred

Born with question marks
about my past,
my people,
I step inside myself
and find running water,
stones too heavy to bring up.
These waters fill the banks
with gold dust and granite,
shining mica and quartz.
No heaven here, but root,
alluvial and veined.
Still I hear voices,
see ghosts drift in and out,
the drone of the river.

In the old growth forest
I listen for footsteps,
and hear birdsong.
In this place of rest,
this ancestral path of migration,
the air pulses angelic
from the throat of a sparrow.
In my hands, the smell of prayer
gathered in a bouquet of lavender.
Madrone bark,
red and gold,
flame like candles.
Crows on the church roof
a ring of ancestors chanting.

What Matters in the Morning

when light fills my window,
an overflow of sun across my bed.
I watch the mountains move closer,
coming home with the daylight.
A monarch flutters into the garden,
rests on a hollyhock,
peacefully opens its wings.
I think I see something shimmer
between the corn rows.
It's my father in old shoes and coveralls
hoeing, tracking weeds along snail roads,
standing up straight, head bent and focused
on the endless furrows of his eighty six years.
The sun shines greenly on his hands
as he listens to roots inch deeper into earth,
watches baby spiders hatch, flex their legs.
When he sees me at the window
I hold my hand up to wave,
he holds his,
we are palm to palm.

Saving Myself

My ancestors are stones of the river.
They sparkle,
their quartz veins
glisten in granite.
I wade carefully,
feeling with bare feet
smooth skinned stones.
A muskrat swims by me
slick-backed, fur shining.

Braced against current
and slippery bank
I lose my step,
fall into the cold stream.
A water sprite travels
through 100 years
to swim through my bones.
Minnows scatter;
I drink the river.

Deer breathe hard in the shadows.
Spirits in the pines
chant in the wind
and a old, scaly fish
beats up from the bottom,
then sinks back down again.

I rise from the current,
find shallow water,
and sit among the stones.
In a mountain pool
where a trout darts,
I bless my reflection.

Living Above Paradise

I have come to live here,
neighbor with skunk and bear,
mountains with discerning faces.
I walk an old deer trail
go inward-
deeper
among the trees,
where sunlight eavesdrops
in streams of light
and pine needles harbor
dark knowledge.
Long live these weeds,
the thorn and the burr,
these mountain strawberries.
There is something good
about this clear, sharp air,
the glitter of basalt and mica,
the sheen of crows.
I hold myself steady in the wind
wonder where to go from here,
listen for the quiet
under leaves.