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Body of history

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BODY OF HISTORY

A Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Erica Goss

May 2007

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04/24/07

ABSTRACT

BODY OF HISTORY

By Erica Goss

This project is a book-length collection of poems, arranged according to various themes. The first section deals with my experience of living in a physical body, or as Virginia Woolf wrote, “telling the truth about my own experiences” in the physical world. The middle section is composed of a poem cycle revolving around the consequences of war and violence, specifically with my family’s survival of World War II. The poems in the last section are concerned with nature and the relations between aging parents and their adult children, as well as the evolving path of a long marriage. Most of these poems are written in either free verse or in forms of my own invention, but I have experimented with blank verse, the sonnet, the pantoum, and the haiku, and include poems written in those forms.

These poems attempt to illuminate the internal world by focusing on particulars of the external world. Like Williams, I find inspiration for my poetry in “things,” using objects, dreams, and memories as openings into that internal world. I scan my surroundings constantly for signs of these doors to poetry. For me, poetry is that place between dream and consciousness, a transcendent location that is rooted in the real world.

*For Don, loving partner of twenty years
whose encouragement made this project a reality*

PREFACE

Some of the poems in this collection were published, some in slightly different form, as follows:

The Bohemian: “My Father at Seventy”

Heart Lodge: “Winter in the Santa Cruz Mountains”

Hotel Amerika: “Dust of an Ordinary Star”

Reed: “Leaving Frankfurt,” “Lunch Date,” “Sleeping Together, Sleeping Alone,” “Sketch of a Marriage,” “Fatigue”

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry has been the focus of my creative life for as long as I can remember. I have always felt that poetry chose me, instead of the other way around. As Neruda wrote, “poetry arrived / in search of me...I don’t know where / it came from.../ I don’t know how or when” (Neruda 456). I began writing poems very early in life. I don’t mean to imply that I was precocious or unusually talented; many skills, such as mathematics, have proven beyond me, and I shall most likely never write a novel. But my devotion to poetry, which began as a young child, has continued throughout my life. Denise Levertov writes, “One feels chosen – and...a sense of dedication to the calling of poet” (Levertov 79). This collection is the result of my efforts over the past three years, which have been a time of intense study, writing, and revision.

I have in my possession a few of the poems I wrote as a child. At age eleven, I wrote, “My garden / is not here but somewhere else / where only I can see it.../ if you have anything to put in my garden / please do.” In this fragment, I asked for inspiration, for something to be put into my “garden,” an imaginary

place I wanted to populate. In other words, I was inviting the muse without knowing it – opening myself up to unknown possibilities. At this young age, I didn't have the patience to wait for the right word or phrase; revision was not part of my practice yet. If the muse didn't show up immediately, then I was off to ride my bike. Yet I kept going back, writing down words I'd heard, whether or not I knew what they meant, and trying, over and over, to make poems out of words and images.

As a child, I often put poems and drawings together; one would lead to the other in an ongoing process of discovery. I'm even more visually oriented as an adult, and all of my poetry is suggested by something real. Most of my poems have their origins in places or objects. For example, the wrinkled face of my grandmother evoked dryness and thirst; I wrote the following lines at age thirteen:

Smiles fade as faces crease
into the mold of heat.
Sweat and work
and see the sun with closed eyes.

Years later, in the poem titled "Responsibility," I wrote:

Each day the body
cycles through
its multiple systems,
discarding waste as it
adjusts its desires:

the same small list
of daily requirements.
Yesterday, a thirst

no drink could slake.

Today, a craving
for salt, grains pressed
from the finger
to the tongue.
Tonight, a fusion:

images filtered
and illuminated,
dreams distilled
from particles of light.

In the adult poem, I began with the human body, imagining its complex processes. I focused on thirst, as I had in the early poem. In “Responsibility,” I tried to convey a cause-and-effect relationship between the body and its innate intelligence, engaged in the invisible and vital activity of keeping itself alive, which is its primary responsibility. In the early poem, I envisioned thirst as an outside force, the result of dryness penetrating the body, but in the adult poem I saw the reverse: the body is aware of its own frailties, and sends signals in the form of constantly adjusting needs: thirst, salt, and finally dreams.

Looking over the poems I have from my childhood, I am able to see that many of the themes I write about as an adult had their origins early on. In my early reading, I was also attracted to poems that isolated particular words or images. I read the poetry of the Imagists: William Carlos Williams, HD (Hilda Doolittle), and Imagist-influenced poets such as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. I stumbled through some of Pound’s *Cantos*, and delighted in e. e. cummings,

whose racist opinions I discovered much later to my deep disappointment. I don't pretend that I was even close to penetrating these poets at such an early age, but I read them nevertheless, intrigued and spurred on by the sounds of their words and the pictures they conjured up: "Sorrow is my own yard / where the new grass / flames as it has flamed / often" (Williams 34); "April is the cruellest month" (Eliot 51); and cummings' haunting line, "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" (Baym 1931). Always I tried to find the "single, radically original metaphor" (Benet 503) that would deepen my perception of the physical world, waking up my senses to new possibilities.

As a child I discovered Denise Levertov, whose poetry made a lasting impression on me and strongly influenced my early work. I was extremely fortunate that my parents owned an extensive collection of modern poetry, which is how I discovered Williams, HD, Eliot, Pound and cummings, and while browsing one day I found Levertov's *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*. The title poem begins "With eyes at the back of our heads / we see a mountain" (Lev. 9). This intriguing sentence satisfied me as a young reader for a long time. "With eyes at the back of our heads" was enough to seed my imagination: the view from the back of one's head would certainly be more wonderful and mysterious than the familiar one, from the front. The phrase also explained why mothers always seemed to know what their children were doing. For months after I discovered

the poem, I did not feel the need to finish reading it, for the first lines were plenty for my young mind to ruminate over.

Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, what fascinated me about this poem is its reversal of the ordinary. Reading Levertov as a child, I sensed, albeit dimly, the skill with her words evoked pictures in my brain. "With eyes at the back of our heads" began for me what turned out to be a lifelong poetic practice. I spent years reading this single poem; bit by bit, the poem revealed itself to me, but never did I receive an easy answer. I still read it, and I still get fresh insights; to quote Eavan Boland's poem "Woman Painted on a Leaf," it's a "poem I can grow old in" (Boland 69). In my own poetry, I strive for a similar, very precise focus: a moment of illumination that originates from the concentrated observation of an experience, an object, an image, or a dream. In my collection, *Body of History*, I have isolated specific elements – the human body, war, family relations and nature – and attempted to convey, in poetry, descriptions of these elements that evoke authentic emotional responses.

As I previously mentioned, the poetry of William Carlos Williams was an early stylistic influence on my poems. Williams presents an image within a short poem made up of dense, controlled lines, often tied to a single, sometimes startling metaphor. For example, the poem "Flowers by the Sea" presents an emotionally charged vision of the ocean using the purest of language, ending with the lines: "the sea is circled and sways / peacefully upon its plantlike stem"

(Williams 91). In “Flowers by the Sea,” Williams recasts the tidal ebb and flow of the ocean into a fresh landscape of the imagination, linking it to nature with the unexpected trope of the “plantlike stem.” Williams’ poems often move out from a central image, filling in the details of that image as the poem takes shape in the reader’s mind. Especially in his Imagist poems, he is a master of the short, deceptively simple, image-packed lyric. These poems are more than the sum of their parts, and seem lit from within.

The lyric poem is not only a function of its images, no matter how original they might be. Emotional authenticity is just as important. In “Ice Storm,” Jane Kenyon writes, “The most painful longing comes over me... / It could be for beauty – / I mean what Keats was panting after” (Kenyon 70). These lines evoke for me that common human need each one of us has for art, for creative expression, and for that which cannot be explained. “It could be for the promises of God; / or for oblivion,” the poem continues, probing that painful longing a little deeper. Kenyon teases out the complex emotion of her poem, an emotion that is equal parts joy, pain, release and entanglement. In my own writing, I strive for poems that convey a combination of image and feeling in the most authentic way possible, which means that I spend many hours and days in revision, paring down the lines into the essence of what I started with. I have only recently begun experimenting with longer lines, but even those long lines are the result of some ruthless pruning. When it hurts to cut a word or a line, it usually means that it

needs to go; my emotional attachment to a particular phrase signals interference with the poem.

If, as Jane Kenyon puts it in “Ice Storm,” I feel that “painful longing” while revising a poem, then I know the line might be recycled, or it might just live forever on a page in my journal. Many of the poems in this collection have left me with lines that will hopefully become part of other poems. For example, the poem “Small and Blue” came from the following lines I wrote in August 2006: “I was surprised, moved unexpectedly by the photo ‘Earthrise’ which shows the earth from the moon, taken in 1968 – dec. 24 – by Apollo 8. *How many times have I seen it?*” A few days later I tried to write about the weird feelings this photo has always conjured for me: fear, longing, joy, and a heavy dose of agoraphobia. The lines that I truly loved, but had to be cut, are these: “The Earth is a thing so large we can’t see her until we leave her,” and “Earth bulges like a pregnant belly, grainy and distant like the ultrasound of my first child.” How I hated taking those lines out of the final draft! However, their heavy emotional pull were out of place. The final version of “Small and Blue” has a detached tone, and ended up, to my surprise, as a poem about the peculiar need humans have to look beyond the Earth for “multi-colored dust storms” and “bodies more elegant than yours [Earth’s]”. The word “elegant” was suggested by the fact that mathematicians often refer to equations as elegant, which also means refined, graceful and tasteful. The irony that I was after here is that life on Earth depends

on constantly changing irregularities, in many ways the opposite of elegance. As impressed as we are by the vast array of galaxies beyond our own humble solar system, we have yet to discover another place capable of sustaining life.

“Small and Blue” started out as a rumination upon a personal experience, but eventually embraced much larger themes. The writing of this poem illustrates what happens so often in the creative process: one’s original vision changes, transcending the object, the dream, and eventually even the emotion that spawned it. A poem is itself an object, and once it is completed, it takes on a new life in the world. The poet’s original vision may still be clear, but more often the intent that spurred the poet to write is completely subsumed. A successful poem distills the original vision of the poet, and each successive word moves the poem away from that vision, step by step.

As in my early experience reading Levertov, I want to reveal the exceptional hiding in the ordinary. The world that exists all around us is rich with real and imaginative possibilities; it is a never-ending, fascinating collage. My Imagist leanings are easy to read here; I deliberately look for juxtapositions rather than obvious connections, knowing that the connections will eventually arrive. If they don’t arrive, I have a different kind of poem, one that depends on the reader to make the leaps. I try to lead the reader through a sequence that might begin with a close examination of a particular place or object, and move out from there into a landscape that is less geographical than it is emotional. I don’t mean to

suggest that any of this is formulaic or mechanical. A lot of what a poet does is to wait, patiently or not, for the correct word to appear. As Lorine Neidecker wrote, “What would they say if they knew / I sit for two months on six lines / of poetry?” (Barnstone 560).

More often than not, the lines the writer needs will arrive, but lines of poetry often arrive out of order, or in the creation of another poem, or while the poet is engaged in some task other than writing. Every writer has a practice that works for her or him; I purposely cultivate repetitive, boring tasks, as I find that they free my mind for its work. Hiking, swimming, driving, even housework – I rely on these activities to evoke the frame of mind I need in order to create. Some poets find this mental space in nature, or in the anonymous crowds of a city; I find them in solitude and repetitive tasks. I have always had a difficult time with prayer or meditation – either activity causes me to fidget uncontrollably. I’m more suited to the Buddhist idea of “walking meditation,” which engages the body and the mind simultaneously, absorbing nervous energy while allowing the mind to enter into its creative mode.

Another way of describing the creative frame of mind is found in Keats’ definition of “negative capability:” “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Perkins 1185). The state of humanity is all too often one of uncertainty and doubt; why not, as Keats invites us, find comfort in mystery? Instead of

paraphrasing a poem, or, as Billy Collins writes in “Introduction to Poetry,” “beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means” (Collins 16), a reader should give a poem his or her deepest concentration. Phil Hey writes “analysis never improved any poem” (Turner 146). I agree: why should we believe that a paraphrase would be more valuable, or easier to understand, than the poem itself? I have often had the universal experience of discovering something new in a poem I thought I knew well, so well in fact that I was convinced the poem had nothing left to teach me. The truths that waited for me in the poem had always existed, but no amount of paraphrasing could reveal them until I myself arrived at the understanding. Having taken this stand against paraphrasing, I *will* defend careful explication. Since poetry is compressed language, readers can benefit from the process of developing a poem’s implications. Even this can be taken too far, however, the poem destroyed under the microscope of analysis.

The poems in this collection offer many opportunities for careful reading. There are three sections, each arranged according to a specific theme. The first section, for which the collection is named, deals with the experiences of inhabiting a human body: birth, death, disease and aging. My premise in these poems is how to maintain happiness while enduring the inevitable breakdown of the body. The middle section is my attempt to order the impressions I have surrounding my family’s status as World War II survivors. Experiencing war second-hand has its own unique emotional components; children of survivors are

faced with the unnamed horrors their parents refuse to talk about, which can be as frightening as the named ones. Finally, the last section is a loose narrative, beginning with Earth and drilling down to issues of nature and family.

The section “Body of History” was inspired by a line I read in Gwen Diehn’s *The Decorated Journal*: “Write a history of your body. Illustrate it” (Diehn 68). I chose poems to illustrate my body’s history, developing various issues as they occurred to me. In several of the poems, I step outside my own physical body and observe it as if it were someone else’s; in others, I look out from inside, and in still others I study the physical conditions of others. The detachment that most of these poems display is deliberate, since I’m trying to be faithful to the prompt and “illustrate” what I see. The speaker in these poems, even when she is talking about herself, is more of a watcher than a participant.

Reading some of Sylvia Plath’s poems helped me arrive at the tone I wanted for this section. For example, the poem “Frog Autumn” from *Colossus* gives us a speaker who advises a frog: “Summer grows old, cold-blooded mother” (Plath 68). By calling the frog a “cold-blooded mother,” Plath combines the fact that frogs are careless parents, abandoning their eggs to their fate, with the fact that since frogs are amphibians, they are biologically cold-blooded. The poem views nature as indifferent rather than cruel; the mood of my poems about the body is similarly detached. Perhaps one way of dealing with the body’s inevitable

progress towards death is to treat aging as if it were an ongoing experiment, whose results should be observed with interest but not too much emotion.

Many, if not most, of my poems are rooted in real places, with the exception of the next section, “For the Brown-Eyed Girls.” The title comes from the title of the section’s first poem, which was inspired when my husband looked at me, as if for the first time, and said, “Everyone here has your brown eyes.” We were in Cologne, Germany at the time, eating lunch at an outdoor café. As soon as he said those words, the Van Morrison song “Brown-Eyed Girl” started playing through my head. I thought of my brown eyes – a legacy from my mother’s mother, whose dark skin and eyes marked her in a family of blue-eyed blonds. When I began writing the poems that make up this section, I started with my vision of a child trying to have a childhood in a war zone. This theme returns in “The Poorest Country in the World,” which imagines what daily life must be like for children in one of the vast refugee camps that cover much of the third world. The poems in this section begin with my mother’s family’s war experiences, and then move out into broader themes: Viet Nam, Iraq, Sudan.

The final section, “Small and Blue,” begins with a view of the Earth as seen from space, and ends with “The Believers,” a poem about the lives of early Christians. In between, I’ve included poems about nature, many of which were inspired by my home in the redwood forest of coastal California, as well as poems about my family and other people in my life. I have arranged these

chronologically within various themes. When it comes to family relationships, I am always drawn to Robert Duncan's poem "My Mother Would be a Falconress," which combines nature and familial issues with the single image of the speaker's mother as a terrible mistress, from which the speaker, embodied by the falcon, tries desperately to free himself. In this poem, Duncan creates a tension between the love the speaker has for his fierce parent – "I dread that she will cast me away" and the desire every child has for freedom: "I tear at her wrist with my beak to draw blood" (Duncan 113). This paradox forms the basis of every parent-child relationship.

My nature poems share a kinship with the Romantics; Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* is a touchstone I return to again and again. For example, he writes in "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," "in lonely rooms, and mid the din / Of towns and cities, I have owed to them, / ...feelings too / Of unremembered pleasure" (Words. 110). I share Wordsworth's sentiment that nature or a natural setting ("the houseless woods") is most conducive to creativity. As a poet, I often struggle with the problem of how to achieve that necessary calmness in a variety of landscapes. If we agree with Wordsworth that we cannot live lives of constant turmoil, that we need his often-praised "tranquility" in order to process, distill, and create poetry, then the challenge for me as an artist lies in locating those quiet moments in today's increasingly fragmented world. As I wrote earlier, I have learned to use the nervous energy that comes "mid the din" to

achieve the frame of mind needed in order to create, but there are still times when concentration is hard to protect.

Many of the nature poems in “Small and Blue” were influenced by Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris*. The skill Glück uses to evoke emotional responses regarding nature from the reader imbues the natural world with a power I was hitherto unaware of, and moved me in unexpected ways. I began to see that humans and nature are bound inextricably in a relationship that is not only made up of physical realities, but also deeply emotional ones. *The Wild Iris* is such an intense collection that it took me months to read it, and as such formed another lasting impression on my writing. The idea that trees, flowers and bushes are not only silent witnesses to human activities but also involved in their own richly imagined inner lives has opened my poetry to an array of new possibilities. As Glück writes in “The Hawthorn Tree,” “things / that can’t move / learn to see” (Glück 18).

In many ways, *The Wild Iris* brought me back to the place I started from as a child. The “garden” I asked to be populated has grown into an ever-widening, imaginative landscape. I understand that nature and the imagination have much in common: meaning and connections await the patient observer. Perhaps that which we perceive as indifference, like the speaker of Plath’s “Frog Autumn,” is really our own lack of comprehension. My poems are not a way for me to

transcend the ordinary, but to see the world as it truly is: precious, brutal, and illuminated.

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I. BODY OF HISTORY

“Killing the angel in the house, I think I solved, but the second [problem], telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved.”

- Virginia Woolf

Woman Haiku

Our weakest muscles
lie beneath the breast in thin
strands over the heart

Colorblind

*No one ever treated us so gently
as these green-going-to-yellow hands*

- Marvin Bell

He bends over the paper, concentrating.
He is learning his colors, for the first time today,
putting labels on shades he will forget again and again.

Look here, I want to tell him, this one is the buff of a
furred bee when viewed in sunlight,
this is rose quartz, the pink of sunrise behind fog,

this is the luster of rubbed gold. That dark square
that puzzles you is the brown of my eyes
at noon, the opaque center of a sunflower.

That pale square is the green-going-yellow
of ginkgo leaves in spring. And now orange, hue
of the sweet potato, and the territory of poppies

glittering on a California hillside. Remove the yellow
I say, and you have red: blood, wine and cherries;
painted lips and so many sports cars.

But he will never see the pink in rose quartz, nor
the green-going-yellow. The brown of the sunflower's core
isn't different from the darkness of blood.

Tomorrow it will be the same, memories fixed against
his own peculiar amnesia. He will ask me again:
is that...green, so happy when he guesses right.

Cadmium yellow, lemon yellow, turquoise, emerald:
a language he studies, recapturing what was lost overnight.
Memories, like the tickle of a hair inside his shirt

or something caught between his teeth
move him back to the paper, to the watercolor set
and the notes from yesterday.

Dust of an Ordinary Star

I walk the dog: we two alpha females hike the hills and imagine ourselves trotting over the tundra with the pack following, bringing home a caribou for the whole tribe to share.

When the phone rings I am the older sister; I research the family diseases; I am supposed to keep secrets so I try not to remember what I am not supposed to know.

Sometimes my thoughts spiral over and over and the sight of a kitchen knife fills me with despair. When this happens my eyes feel peeled open.

I sink my hands into my garden soil and feel it collect under my fingernails; I pull up great handfuls of earth and smell them when no one is looking; sometimes I have dirt ringing my nostrils for hours but no one says anything.

The dog and I are getting older, looking more alike: sagging jaws and weird little tufts of hair. This bothers me more than her. Neither one of us is interested in chasing after men on motorcycles anymore.

I am a mother; twice I gave birth to healthy, perfect sons; once I had a daughter but she was not perfect so I cast her body from mine; when she was gone my spine made a great lurch and I stopped sleeping.

I plant seeds; I collect leaves, eggs and stones; I once found a jawbone with all of its teeth still attached.

I lie awake at night and stare out the window; I see lights out in the forest and wonder if they are flashlights or just the sweep of distant headlights; I wonder where people go at three in the morning while I am trapped here in my bed.

I send letters: they enter the secret house of the mailbox, deposits that can never be withdrawn, they settle into rectangular drifts awaiting the great paw of the mail carrier.

When the sky is too loud I head for the woods; a silent redwood pulls the sunlight down; I place my ear against her trunk and hear the settling dust of an ordinary star.

The Appointment

I sit with the other parents,
come to hear the facts. Our
unborn children bear labels:
irregular, anomalous, damaged.

Like threatened bees, passing
signals between antennae,
mothers and fathers hand
each other pamphlets.

How large their eyes seem,
their mouths working around
unpronounceable maladies
and unthinkable costs.

They keep their voices low
as if a baby slept nearby
or a funeral was happening
in the next room.

After Birth

While the baby who had just
made his exit from my body
lay quietly on
my chest, as if nothing
remarkable had happened

something else emerged
through that new opening

and as I peered over the baby's
damp head, rubber-gloved
hands pulled out from under me
a sloppy mass of blood and veins

and bore it away, the gray chord
swinging like an elephant's trunk.

Hand: A Landscape

The narrowest hinge on my hand puts to scorn all machinery

- Walt Whitman

Coarse as blades
 of beachgrass
hairs rise from sand-colored skin

the desert between thumb and forefinger
 cracks into
a parched mosaic

close to the surface
 veins run in rivers
carrying minerals from deep underground

blood flows around invisible corners
 sliding over
extremities of bone

at the end of my arm
 a fist
breaks open into a star

A Biography of My Right Breast

It rose from my chest one day,
little white hill:

the one on the right,
the one that grew first.

The left one followed later,
a pillow over the heart,

but the one on the right is still
the elder sister, the one who will

always be a little older,
a little wiser,

a little bigger. My babies preferred
the right side, cheeks

pressed into its low swell,
the crook of my elbow tracing

soft skulls. Once, the right
breast thickened, filled with

pointed stars. Strangers
wrapped their fingers around it

and pressed it flat between cold stones,
but the stars refused to break.

I feel their points at night, when
I've rolled onto my stomach,

awake to new possibilities
of loss, finally aware

that my body is moving
forward in a direction only it

understands.

Let the Blood Come Down

Today
anxiety follows me
like an I.V. on wheels.

A little pile of rotted weeds,
yesterday's hopes
lie just outside the window.

There is too much furniture in
this room. The bed, the desk,
the chair

loom at me, threatening.
I crave the light
like a moth.

No one can help now.
I sit still,
waiting for the blood to come down.

Sleeping Together, Sleeping Alone

Your mother has slept alone
these past ten years since
the day your father lay
down on the couch and died.

Has she moved, a little each
night, towards the center
of the bed, from her position
of forty years on the left or right?

My grandparents chose
separate rooms, undecorated
like monastic cells:
one hard twin bed,

nightstand with lamp,
stacks of *Readers Digest*;
the rooms mirror images
placed on opposite sides

of the hall. After grandfather
died, grandmother
moved his bed
back into her room.

When the day comes
that I sleep alone again the way
I did in my mother's womb
and later in the little basket

she placed next to her side
of the bed – alone because
I am certain that you will die
first, just as you are certain

that I will die first – what dream
will fill the space next to me;
whose dream head will dent
the pillows that smell
forever like your hair?

Objects in Mirror

Things seem closer than
they appear. It is just past

the solstice and soon the first
yellow maple leaf will leave

the tree and twirl, slowly, to the ground,
beginning the piles of autumn.

The maple tree has moved.
Its leaves graze the window.

The face in the mirror stares
back, unshadowed: cheekbones

fall away from the beak of nose;
forehead hovers above eye sockets.

Beneath the skin lies its future:
lines creeping out from

the lips, etching the places where smiles
pucker the mouth and cheeks;

the subtle changes as gravity
re-makes the body. The face

has learned faith, like the maple
it believes in the unseen,

knows that in the mid-life of one season lives
the infancy of the next.

Fatigue

Gently
it settles
usually choosing
the hour
after lunch
to begin its
slow injection,
a mask lowered
over the mouth.
First, the eyes
lids heavy blankets
then the numbing
of the chest
as the blood sinks.
There is no
ether like this,
harmless at first,
even healthy
in small doses.
Drowsiness,
lassitude -
from far away
the rhythmic
buzz of
an insect caught
in a jar.

Hours

A year of illness
breaks down
into hours that

must be
endured, sometimes
silently, or with

others, people
you no
longer recognize

whose mouths
form mysterious
syllables. They

stand outside the
door, outside
the room where

you are reading
books about the
lives of insects.

No one
but you hears
logs rotting in the

forest or the whisper
of earth
passing through the

body of a worm. In
another room
someone is turning

a television on
and off while you
lie alone in bed and

dream of bees
experts at
the short busy life.

Responsibility

Each day the body
cycles through
its multiple systems,
discarding waste as it
adjusts its desires:

the same small list
of daily requirements.
Yesterday, a thirst
no drink could slake.

Today, a craving
for salt, grains pressed
from the finger
to the tongue.
Tonight, a fusion:

images filtered
and illuminated,
dreams distilled
from particles of light.

Winter in the Santa Cruz Mountains

Armed with oven mitts
and casseroles
we deliver meals, as if
that would fill the void
left by the son
who died too young.
We stare up at
this cliff of grief, from which,
maddened by the pressing clouds
a boulder has toppled.
We stand before it,
unable to move
around the vast pieces,
holding our warm loaves,
our shepherd's pies,
angel food cakes, divinity –
family recipes
for occasions when
no other gesture is possible.
We line the dishes up
one by one:
rows and rows of hot suppers
march into the future
with salads and desserts to keep
them company
on the long journey ahead.

II. FOR THE BROWN-EYED GIRLS

For the Brown-Eyed Girls

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening

- Paul Celan, "Deathfugue"

In Germany there is a Roman town
where once the windows were all broken.
Night-flying birds made perfect circles
rumbling over voiceless gloom;
their white eyes striped the dark and spotted
brown-eyed girls who looked like you,
tripping flat-heeled home on nude stick legs,
your pockets wet with stones from Mother Rhine:
stones to mark each day you lost and lived.

A cat's eye opens in your palm
you crouch alone, a fist of earth;
nails black from scratching open
graves for splintered toys, what's left of dolls
you used to play with, books you hated
anyway, pages loose like rising river terns.
You'll start from sleep to hear
the milky song plucked from bent
and brittle strings – music
for the brown-eyed girls who looked like you.

Three Hundred Houses

It's June, 1945. We sit around the breakfast table, staring at our empty plates. Grandmother announces, *we're going to Cologne*. She takes my hand. My mother rises halfway from her chair; my sister slides from her lap, complaining. Grandmother and I start walking. It's eighteen kilometers, but Grandmother just heard that three hundred houses are left standing in the city. One might be hers. She pushes the only thing with wheels we have: a pram with a bent axle. We stuff it with round, green heads of cabbage. At every step they shiver and squeak. I keep my eyes down, avoiding the rationed, indifferent sky. The river drains out all its blue. Faces float up at me, streaming hair, hands palm-up like water lilies. The shore tilts with toppled bridges. Grandmother holds my hand tight. Her hand is a claw, covered in diamonds. Sparks press at the corners of my eyes.

Two cigarettes buy us a ride halfway there, hidden in a supply truck. At a checkpoint a pink-faced boy pulls back the tarp and finds me and the old lady. After a long look he says something in English and the truck moves forward. They let us off near the silent zoo. My feet are bloody and the cabbages are whining about their bruises. Weaving through the new landscape we find the house. It's the only one left on the street. Mysterious boxes block the front door. Grandmother wrestles it open, and we collapse on the bayoneted sofa. Ammunition clips, powdered milk in star-white balls, and candy wrappers already licked clean litter the ripped carpets. Evening is just coming on. We sleep on the floor. The next day children play in the streets. When the buses run my mother appears and almost hugs me. Quaker food boxes fall from the sky. That summer I drink milk, eat strawberries and grow six inches.

Brot des Lebens (Bread of Life)

for my grandfather, Willi Pferdekamp¹

In Spanish boots you ran away from death,
A year of life sewn in your army coat,
Your broken heels upon the frozen roads,
Somehow you lived for months on stolen bread.

You stumped across the bloody continent,
Nibbling slowly at the rough brown loaves.
Measuring each day's steps in hardened dough,
The gnawing near your heart was ever present.

At home your children went from farm to farm
Trading treasures from your noble house:
One by one, the candlesticks and vases

Went for scraps of bread, then spilled grain left in barns.
Undaunted, on you trudged through burning towns,
Taunted by children with dirty faces.

¹ In 1945, my grandfather escaped from the Spanish Army, fighting at the eastern front, near Stalingrad. He walked west across Europe and sought shelter from an American military base in the Netherlands.

The Gleaner

And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and the stranger.

Leviticus 19: 9/10

Dawn has crept over the dangerous land.
At a field's edge you crouch on whittled legs.

The scent of crushed grass lingers
after the oxen cart has passed.

A potato fits a child's flat hand.
Be careful: the tiny ones can slip through small fingers

Like Hansel's white pebbles.
Don't let your stomach rush you!

Sift slowly, carefully and stow
each rough brown nugget in an apron pocket big enough

To feed mother and sisters, waiting at home. Push
the clods aside and dig into the ruts

Left by the great wheels. Little hands are as good
as a pair of young eyes made sharp

By hunger. Creep back to the edge of the field and run,
your apron full,

Into the rising of the sun.

Letter to Her Husband

Dear Willi, it is fall again and again I have not heard from you.
I cannot keep my mother from climbing onto the roof every night
to watch for bombs.

The schools are closed now. Mother teaches the children at home.
Though the neighbors laugh at me, I always wear one of my silk blouses
when I fetch water or trade our ration cards.

How fortunate that I speak English. It was quite dangerous, and awkward too,
when that young British soldier pointed his gun at my mother. I was polite
and told him, "no Nazis here." The cellar was so dark.

What I miss most, almost as much as you, dear husband, is apples, how they
pop against the teeth at first bite and then the flood of juice. I can
almost taste one now.

Dear Willi, if you were here, I could show you the children, asleep
in our big bed. Instead of supper they go to bed early.
"Look," I would say, "They are still alive."

West of the Graveyard

1.

The city where you died is young again.
Bulldozers are scraping up the past
and making careful piles for scientists.
On the street the brown-eyed children toss their
curls. I'll never know *your* eyes' true brown.
Were they flecked with gold? Or black indoors,
the brown revealed out in the sun? Or
sepia, like fading photographs?
I want to know the life you had beyond
the hausfrau's dreary rounds: husband, children, church;
your mother's purse an eye that occupied
your marriage bed; the cloistered world of women:
ration cards, the backyard pump.

2.

In the tedium of years of nights when
sirens punctured sleep, did you draw your
children to you like a mother hen or did you realize
that closeness made it easier for all
of you to die at the same time?
Did you stow your daughters in dark corners?
Did you place your hands over your ears
to block their sobbing: mama we're afraid –
Your daughters made their way back home
from the crowded hospital, hand-in-hand
and holding fast the dream of you asleep
and lying on the table. My mother gave
your name to me, forced it in her father's
mouth and in the puckered mouth of the new wife
who quickly claimed all that was yours.

3.

I came to see the city where you lived.
I didn't see the place they buried you.
I didn't cross the river, find your name
among the stacked and numbered thousands,
touch the stone, imagining the face
I've only seen in black-and-white: not
beautiful, but rare: your skin a dusky
hue from somewhere south of here.

There was a man who drove a cab, his eyes
were kind, he said he'd take me there but then
my language failed, I saw your death: a closed
door opening, a rift that filled with light
and paralyzed I stood, west of the graveyard.

Conception

My mother leans back
against the river stones.
Above her the sky is a vast
room she remembers

from childhood. She thinks
of flying, of crossing the ocean.
There is a man whose face
swims in a swirl of words.

My mother looks up,
her body's plan clear to her now.
There are debts to be paid,
and hard days coming.

Everything has been taken.
My mother closes her hand
around a river stone.
Her eyes are open.

Peeling Potatoes

I can't peel potatoes without remembering a summer afternoon in 1965. The three of us – my mother, grandmother and I – sweated in an L.A. kitchen, sun bearing down on the house with palpable force, the occasional sonic boom swallowing bits and pieces of our conversation. My mother held a scrubbed brown Russet in her left hand, a paring knife in her right, and demonstrated for me the exacting skill of potato-peeling. "Don't take too much off, leave some peel," she said, holding the potato in her hand, moving the knife in diminishing circles, around and around until it probed the cave of the eye, popping out grains of soil. I waited for my turn with the knife, knowing what a privilege it was to hold it in my childish hand, seeing the purpose in its scimitar shape, not like the big flat butter knives my grandmother set the table with. A few miles away, the summer sun would soon fan riots out of the burning asphalt, and a week of broken glass would rise in strange, glittering towers – even further away boys withered and died in a nightmare jungle of shame. But here in my grandmother's kitchen, I held the potato in my left hand, carefully imitating my mother, working the knife under her watchful eyes, dropping spirals of peel into the kitchen sink, while my grandmother tucked her good linen napkins under the fine German china plates lying heavy on the table, and called the family to supper.

Leaving Frankfurt

The plane pushes away the earth.
Pressure in the ears releases;
a flood of sounds:

language that cuts to the heart,
forced from the back of the throat,
scraping the ear

in tones rich with saliva.
Eye-watering speech,
words that must be

chewed until only a pulp
remains. Always
a little piece of gristle is left

to work again
and again through the small moist chamber
of the mouth;

vowels roughen the muscles of the cheek as
consonants pinch the palate,
searching for order,

the end of the sentence already known
before lips part.

Hansel's Father

I couldn't believe my ears.
She told me her plan. We were so poor,
Me cutting wood, helpless to stop her.
The children growing thinner and thinner.

She told me her plan. We were so poor
And she had that crazy gleam in her eyes.
The children growing thinner and thinner.
For weeks she hounded me.

She had that crazy gleam in her eyes
And I was weak from hunger too.
For weeks she hounded me.
I knew she was going mad.

I was weak from hunger too
And so I agreed to take them there.
I knew she was going mad.
I knew that Hansel would come home.

I agreed to take them there
And made sure my son had heard.
I knew that Hansel would come home.
He filled his pockets with white stones.

I made sure my son had heard
He led Gretel by the hand.
He filled his pockets with white stones.
Next time, bread was all he had.

He led Gretel by the hand
They walked into the forest.
That time, bread was all he had.
That time they didn't come back.

They walked into the forest.
Me cutting wood, helpless to stop her.
That time they didn't come back.
I couldn't believe my ears.

The Morning News

Below a photo of things left behind, this caption:
“the family was removed without incident.”

There were parents, several children,
a half-blind grandfather. The picture shows
a table arranged with little foreign bowls,
room to hold a spoonful of rice or a fig.
Antique decorations ring the small cavities.
Generations of scraping out the last
morsel have left deep gouges. Each bowl
sits empty, a thick napkin folded by its side.

Perhaps a rush of air startled father when
the door flew open and soldiers filled the room.
Was mother just about to ladle out
a dollop of porridge? Did grandfather choose
that moment to misplace his glasses?
Sister, as usual, talking too much.
I imagine the family members in the street.
They take the cups of hot liquid offered
them. As the soldiers hustle them on,
someone enters their house and snaps this photo.

The Poorest Country in the World

It will arrive here any minute
as long as these things stay constant:
boys learning to shoot,
the slow march of parents,
limbs like sticks of wood,
a statue with raised arms.

There are no old people
and no garbage. You must
understand: these are luxuries.
Girls have a thing to give, but
only once. Childhood is shorter
than a honeybee's life.

When the place is properly
cleaned, picked over and over
until the bare earth shines, the saints
will arrive, turn their palms up to the sky
and down onto the heads
of the children.

Before a child places her hand
into the hand of a man her mother
gives her a jar of earth and says:
when you arrive drop this
on the ground before you
that something beautiful
might grow there.

III. SMALL AND BLUE

Small and Blue

Earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence

- Archibald MacLeish

It's taken almost forty years
but finally I am able to stand before your image
without expecting an explanation.

You know the tragedy of wayward children
who scorn the safety you provide,
always turned away from you;

telescopes bristling at stars that wink in and out
of multi-colored dust storms. We comb
the universe in search of bodies more elegant
than yours, systems to prove our equations.

How often I have desired to transcend you,
to leave the pains of gravity and hunger – you,
clinging mother, folding me in your arms.

This is my punishment:
the deep distress I feel at the sight of you
trapped in a poster or folded into a book,

your image waiting to possess me, to evoke
the sensation of falling endlessly
into a blue glow.

Stones

They know we are eager
for discovery, and that is why
they wait, half-buried,
for pick, shovel, or hand,
their tips sticking out
where we can find them.

When we go out into the world
we need stones. They
find their way into pockets, travel
with us from coast to coast,
anchoring stacks of paper
on desks everywhere.

It takes centuries for a stone
to inhale a single breath
and so they are always cold
to the touch: it is the great effort
of breathing that locks the stone
into silence.

A stone wastes nothing, spends
nothing as it gathers soil to
itself and gradually crumbles
again. Its day is unfathomable
but always the stone is alert,
awake, available. Without

warning stones may dislodge,
raining upon human heads
in a tumble of force, but this
only happens when we have
forgotten to look for them,
have left them alone too long,

breathing into the earth.
The stones on my desk came to me
slowly, for that is their way:
two from the river of my
ancestors, two from my sons,
whose first gifts to me were stones.

Fig Tree

My fruit
looks like
what men
have dangling
between their legs:
dark and pear-shaped,
seeds crowded
towards the
bulging end.
Bitten open
it's pink inside,
soft, and sweet.
Plant me in
your yard
if you dare.
My appetite
is huge. I'll
crowd out
the other plants,
murder the lawn,
crack the pavement.
My trunk will rise
triumphant
above the ruined grass.
Yards away
you'll find
my humped,
scabby roots,
looking for
water wherever
I can find it.

4:00 a.m. With Open Window

How to account for these long stretches? The hum
of distant machines,
your steady breathing, the unquiet dark. Like tent walls,
the blackness gives thin shelter,
draws voices from the heart, renews
the pangs of the day,
a multi-voiced hammering crescendo –
so many sounds
in the night, so many lives lived out loud, large-eyed
night creatures slink and scurry,
kill and eat, mate and die while we lie listening while
the darkness unravels its
layers. Time to let the voices go as
one by one their stings diminish –
from the open window, balcony, and into the woods
following well-worn paths
revealed in the faint light
of the coming dawn.

View From 30,000 Feet

The inevitable line
 between blue and gray

a country littered
 with fragments

cul-de-sacs
 squat below peaks

from which
 everything falls away

bones
 in sunlight

Haunted

A forest grows
under the house.
Green rises between
the foundation stones,
crumbles away
the concrete, leaves
tunnels for the termites
whose tiny white jaws
click away
night and day.

A knock
brings me to the back door.
A leaf leans
against the screen,
the exact outline
of my hand,
lobes branching into fingers,
the stem a brittle wrist.
I hear footsteps,
as I often do
when I am alone.

Small-hooved deer
regard me with wet brown eyes
jaws moving sideways.
The ghosts of predators
who once claimed
these woods
waft their scents
under the noses
of dreaming dogs.

Season of Moths

They came to eat the trees, in numbers not seen
in ten years, plain, tan moths weaving through summer days,
fluttering by the thousands.

Clumsy, persistent, they chewed each pointed oak leaf round
leaving the tough veins exposed,
windows to the dark forest.

At night they press themselves against the screen –
what is the weight of so many wings?
And the breathing skins

of so many small bodies.

At the Edge

The shore,
crumbling piers,
rattle of an
amusement park.
I step into the Pacific
and let it take me
up to the knees.
What next?
Stand here in
blue-green or step
off the shelf of beach,
walk until water
covers my head
and Monterey Canyon
appears beneath my feet.
There is no
going over, and all
bridges fail
eventually – the only
way is through
this place of surge
and ebb, foam,
light and air.
Now I'm in it
up to my thighs,
waist, shoulders, neck;
feet leaving
the ground,
salt biting my eyes,
hair a sponge.
Behind me
amusement park,
distant hills.
Before me the rooms
of the sea, vast,
dim, and edgeless;
muted sounds
of a mirror-world.
Rich oxygen
filters though
new-grown gills.

New Year's Day

In the gloom of a
January afternoon, persimmons
hang evenly spaced
from wet black branches

as if fastened with clothespins,
little suns against a slate sky.
In every fruit, the world:
light, warmth, food and seed.

The afternoon's pickings
sit on a kitchen counter,
pointed fruit-bombs,
dangerously ripe.

The cook works slowly,
preserving them in jars.
High above the kitchen,
a house perches on a ridge

of the Sierra Azul,
tucked into its own
private cloud, domed windows
reflecting

the evening sun: sultan's hats,
bright orange, rain down
on the commuters, slicing the fog
along Highway 17.

Daylight Savings Time

The boy sitting beside me in this car
with no brakes, leans outside

and says, "See the black line of the hill.
The clouds are faces, white

against the evening sky." The boy
is old enough to drive

and though today I yelled at him
about his room, overflowing pigsty:

dried-out yogurt containers and bowls
of peanut shells, his eyes

tell me he's already moved forward
with the arc of spring light,

my angry words gone with the lost hour.
We sit in the front seat, happy, quiet.

If spring promises renewal in exchange
for that little piece of time

then why can't we throw in all
the rest of our crimes:

our selfish prayers, our airless dreams,
the remembered sting of white lies,

every artificial grin, every guilty headache
from the extra glass of wine –

the boy flips his black hair back
from his face, skin white in the fading light,

and I think I hear the deep songs of dwarves
coming home after a day in the mines.

Mother's Day 2005

You peered
into the spotted throat
of a foxglove and said,
there must be a plan
to all this
and as you held
the blossom
carefully in your small hand
crisscrossed with flat white scars
I thought we hide our pains
well, not like these
redwoods with
blackened trunks
unaware of
what is lost forever
always reaching up.

Fall Reverie

Sometimes it's a damp afternoon
and I'm alone in a dark room
face down on a black couch
my heart a thudding engine.

Warmed by a small box of flames
I hear the whispery chant
of the rain as below me miles
of earth exhale slow breaths.

The rain writes our futures
in lines of wet silver; it cannot
stop weeping, but whether
for joy or sorrow depends

on the hearts underground
living small in darkness,
knowing which way to push their roots
and the direction of the light.

Gluttony

I jerk the little magazine
 off the shelf, paw rudely
past the prose
 and like a scurfy
predacious insect
 proboscis moist and sticky
suck the page clean
 of poems.

Magnetic Poetry Pantoum

Each morning, before coffee
I check my white refrigerator.
What new messages appear
In its tiny mad garden?

I check my white refrigerator.
Fragments stick and tilt.
In its tiny mad garden
The bees are always busy.

Fragments stick and tilt
In a random springtime dance.
The bees are always busy
But never while you watch.

In a random springtime dance
The words unclot and move
But never while you watch,
Your eyes need to be fresh.

The words unclot and move
What new messages appear?
Your eyes need to be fresh
Each morning, before coffee.

Olivia

On Thursday at
nursery school
Olivia tells me her
sister is a lost boy.

Olivia rarely smiles.
Her face is too plump
for such bright eyes.
She does not enjoy

the snack project. Art
bores her. She sees me
watching her. She does
not return my smile.

Finally I get it. "Peter Pan!
Your sister is in the play!"
Olivia sighs. "My shoes
confuse me."

She runs outside. When
Olivia is an old woman
she will not clean house
or invite people over.

Blue Moon

Once again I am face to face with the Hallmark cards
filling agoraphobic displays that tilt over my head,
each small white window backlit in blue.

He is not the funny dad, the helper, the sports coach,
the father with the tool belt, remote control, or pipe; he's not
the man behind the lawnmower or the man under the car.

He is the father who studied star charts while bread dough
soured in the desert heat of our sparkle-ceiling tract house,
who hauled me out of a deep sleep one midnight,

The Milky Way a gargantuan white smear; I held on to
the swing set while he pointed at the revolving sky.
Then he moved out for the first time.

He is the father who listens to Zappa, Mozart and the Beatles,
who blew his lungs out at twenty-five playing clarinet
reed-thin in Army boots, deep in a Berlin winter.

He is the father I lost in too many libraries
watched him sail away into a book and felt myself go blurry.
His eyes on the book, my breath adjusting

to the slow rhythm of pages turning. I learned to watch
the clock, to watch myself, to nudge him carefully the way
a sleepwalker is guided to safety. He moved out again

and again, each time a little further away.
His house, a ruin, collapses in slow motion.
The cat understands, and catches mice for both of them.

One day, I know, he won't be there, tucked between the levee
and the pear trees, flirting at the coffee shop, writing ghost stories
and forgetting to pay his phone bill.

Crisp envelops crumple in my hands. I stand in the flat
light of June holding a card that reads:
"Dads like you come once in a blue moon."

My Father at Seventy

In the warm shallows of summer nights
my father walks with coyotes.

In the hours when the sleep I've chased finally arrives
he hears them, yipping in the distance

And he rises, pulls on his boots and tramps
outside the breezy tall-ceilinged house

Where he lives alone in the Chinese village along
the Sacramento River.

They don't bother him, he says,
but there is something about the way

Their voices get louder as he walks in the moonlight
along the levee, louder

And then softer, fading away when he stops.
At home they find their way into his dreams,

Green eyes arranged in untidy rows,
shaggy dog-heads

Outlined in gray against the black night.
My father, open-eyed on his

Bed in the deep summer quiet
remembers the coyote

Almost forty years past, the one he shot
to protect my little brother and me,

One charmed summer.

Sketch of a Marriage

She loved a tall man with eyes like
old green bottles,
a coughing laugh and an unsweetened smile.

Cruelty was his mother tongue.
As a boy he bathed
his wounds in bowls of cold soup.

The sun shone on him like it does in California,
in late winter,
careful like museum lights angled

to illuminate a painting while
the wall behind
recedes into darkness.

Expert in the art of offense,
he never learned
defense. He took it out on the telephone,

splintered against a wall, on the garbage can
rolling forlorn
down the suburban street.

The children watched him through book covers,
watched her sprinkle
cocoa on her morning oatmeal.

She skimmed and skimmed but finally
one day the fat
was gone. She had no choice but

To cut into the flesh, scrape the bones clean,
pack them neatly
and flee. How they rattled in her suitcase,

Those bones shiny with wear, pitted with
disease, dust of
old wars, and new ones yet to come.

Birthday Poem

My father gave me a book.
 When I opened it
 the ripe olive smell of his hair
 drifted up from the pages.

I searched the book
 but found only
 the voices of men
 with small imaginations.

My father and I
 looked back on a century
 where the logic of war
 had squeezed humanity sideways.

I told my father *he* lacked
 imagination, he could not
 see a way to recast
 the century of war behind us,

Like the poets in his book,
 exquisite in their suffering,
 the battle arenas such
 rich inspiration,

And he shot me a look,
 the pages ruffling
 between his hands,
 his hair two white sails

Moving away from his
 head, his green eyes flashing,
 the thin line of his lips whispering
 a warning.

Lunch Date

Twenty years ago I let you convince me.
We talked shop over turkey sandwiches.

The ends of conversation came together.
Into the silence you tossed the story

of your uncle, a worthless man who
tormented your father in that way that elder

brothers have until the younger boy went
after him with a knife. I chewed my turkey,

and offered the tale of my own father, who
one day removed the swinging belt from his father's hands

and with all of a sixteen-year-old's resolve said
"there will be no more of that."

We sat then, in the presence of these youths
who had become our fathers,

as the lunch hour ended and the sandwich shop emptied out,
afternoon light tilted over our plates.

I had to look up, I know now, because in that silence
I fell in love, a thing I had not written on my list of tasks

for the day, only the word "lunch"
scrawled in my personal organizer.

Written on Silk

The barbarians came playing guitars.
They galloped down the steppes on thick-muscled ponies
and lured my children from our sunny pastures.

Rooted, I could not follow. The warm air clung
to my limbs like cheap fabric.
I would not be seduced into war.

These black sentences kept me alive. I could not weep.
My children were gone, but even so
I only thought of him,

The barbarian who roped my small ones with
their smell of dust and silk, draped them over
his pony and took them away

From my perfumed room, my cage of sun.
I did not move as he pushed in
my walls of painted paper, my easily toppled world

Left in shreds. Gold chains bound my heart, I hid
my face in my sleeve. I missed them so, my small
ones, but mostly I dreamed of him, his coarse hands

On my shoulders and the way he bent my chin back
slowly, his beard against my throat and then
was gone, my hands clutching the air.

The Believers

We emerged naked, again and again from the river, accepted the milk
and honey. How we needed that sweetness!
We put on the robes, and tilted our faces to your kiss.

We made a house for you, and tried to find you in its corners.
We commanded a man to speak to us in your voice
and waited while he faltered. No lightning came;

it was a day of ordinary perils. We continued to repeat
the name we thought you would understand, the name
we invented after identifying the bearded goat, the brown locust.

We gathered for miracles, to watch demons leave us
and fly back to you. We understood, finally,
that your love increases our suffering.

How many days have we kept awake? The great unblinking
disk of your eye, black slit in a golden orb,
burns like the fires on the sun.