

3 Poems by Maria Bennett

god and the city of new orleans

i spit out the fruit
in disgust
throw away
a perfectly ripe strawberry
while watching a half-naked mother
holding her starving infant
aloft
this irony will not be forgotten
i pray
as flood waters rush
around her waist
my shame
is this sacred city
new orleans
birthplace of the high and joyous miracle
which is jazz music
home of impossibly beautiful creole women
heads wrapped in red bandannas
chanting the blessings of hot rice fritters
calas tout chaud
one dollar each
on street corners
where louis armstrong
once sang for his supper
beneath a wrought iron lamppost
unaware of his princely
destiny
accompanied by a lone clarinet
defying nature
to try and stop swaying
with the rhythm
on this corner
the glorious reminder
god made the human body
for dancing
the voice
for singing

here now
where all processions
have turned to funeral marches
slow and muddy
as the levees break
or are thrust open
even the saints have left
along with the rich
of course
as happened once before
but we are too lost to remember
the lifeless poor
float
like water lilies
as lake pontchartrain
spills
into
the parish
of saint bernard
and i begin
my long quarrel
with god
wondering
who
will
listen
and who
will
save
us

metaphor of the vine

these roots
struggle
to create
sink down
thirsty
upon planting

here is your source:
clay
water
sunshine
breath
your mystery
is this:
good soil
makes a lazy vine
and the lazy vine
births a grape
without
distinction
rocky soil
makes each tendril
push harder
for its life
scrape past stones
for its essence
and in the work
grows the sweetest
fruit

scrubbing your back

this is our
nightly
ritual
you soak
in the
claw-footed
tub
steam rises
from the bubbling
water
with lavender soap
i scrub your
back
gently at first
then

pressing harder
your skin,
like an infant's
milk white
grows red
in this crescendo of touch
memory intersects us
my hands become
your mother's
washing away fears
warm fingers
unknotting
all distances
as she sings to you
her favorite child
long ago
this polish lullaby
circling us
still