

Song of the Lost Daughter

Hair of rope dragged along the ground,
I sleep in rags huddled in a cardboard box
dreaming of shoes, candy, and clean water.

My father disappeared looking for work,
my mother searching for food.
Now little brother brings me brackish water,
and I hold him like a blessing while he sleeps.

Too scared to search for firewood,
too weak to beg for food, too tired for a lullaby,
hair of rope dragged along the ground,
my emaciated body too thin for an embrace.

Bruise

Echoing blueness,
color of the impossible darkness
inside bells.
Blue awakening sting
of an embrace which still makes
distance smile.

You have made yours
the riverbed of my flesh
where night always returns
to drink from your hands.

You have made yours
this living fingerprint
in which I feel you
holding me from within.

Song Without Warning

I want what fire craves
to hold everything always
to burn through appearance
like flames shattering a mirror.

I want what summer promises
in breezes perfumed by honeysuckle,
jasmine, and rhododendron blossoms
when heat quickens the senses
during nights of unforgettable lovemaking
like poems in which you
encircle every line.

I want what water clenches
when deep-rooted trees are swept away
by the river's flood tide.

I want what compost and soil sustain,
tenderness turning flesh into lightning's afterimage
with pleasure that can keep no secrets.

Do Not Tell Them

for Dileep Jhaveri

Do not tell them all at once,
and do not tell them too early
of the unbearable suffering they must endure,
of the thousand ways that flesh
renders us helplessly vulnerable.

Do not tell them what you know so well
that when they have lived long enough
they, too, will come to dread the body.

Do not tell them that such grief
must be borne alone,
that friends and family can not
fathom or comfort such despair.

Like a seawall battered by waves,
you have taken your stance knowing
that the ocean can never fail.

Because you are fearless at last,
beyond even love or loathing,
do not tell them at what price
you have earned the confidence to sing.

The Painter Explains Nakedness

Her body merely
framed her face,
and the key to her face
was that oracular smile.
Her nakedness was camouflage.
Whether I painted her
standing on tiptoes
with her back arched
and breasts tightened by arms
stretched over her head,
or if an oval bite-mark
was visible just beneath
the hairline of her neck,
or even if she was kneeling
with her thighs spread
open as daybreak,
only her unfathomable smile—
like an eye staring outward
from the center of a lotus—
pulled each gaze into the canvas
with a whirlpool's irresistible urgency.
What light really admires is a smile
that explains nothing.

Round Song

“A round thing turns around . . .”

—Jacobus Revius

I need a song round as a glassblower’s lips,
round as the shadows in bells,
a song tangled with wishes and promises,
a song heavy with ripeness and the aroma of fruit.
I need a song that makes coursing blood quicken,
that curls your body into an arc of shuddering,
a song of echoing moans in empty alleyways past midnight,
a song that licks insistently wherever your body blushes.
I need a song twirling like a tongue tip around your nipple,
a song irresistible as the the silk lightning of your hair,
a song that bends like legs wrapped around a lover’s waist,
a song that coaxes your thighs open like sunlight.
I need a song round as a bruised bite mark on a shoulder,
a song that sways like hips dancing to the radio,
or a bridge about to collapse,
a song that’s blind as rain.
I need a song round as roots clutching a stone,
a song flawless as a pearl that rolls along your waiting lips,
a song round as the dreamer’s clenched fist,
a song that circles in you like blood.