IN THE MIDDLE OF THINGS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the Middle of Things is a creative work, a book of poems, which represents the author in the midst of a journey of several years. This collection is the fruit of an exploration of the author’s soul as well as the souls of her family, the souls of the living, as well as the dead. In the Middle of Things allows this author to look with a stranger’s distance at the relationships, especially those with the women in her life, which have shaped her. Several themes will become apparent to the reader of this work. These themes will be discussed at length in the preface. The poems in this collection traffic in loss and failed attempts at recovery, emotional and physical starvation, disability and inability, with women as both the users and the dealers. In some ways, this work may be considered an awakening. For this author, it is a settling in.
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To Deborah, for allowing me a glimpse of what poetry really looks like. To John, for recognizing my limits and becoming one of the people I like most. And to Salvatore, il miglior autista, for understanding the work of a liar, and never once believing me when I said I couldn’t.
For my Mother,
with Hope and a strange Joy
Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovaì per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita.
Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura...  

Inferno, I, 1-4

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1 Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard...
Se il mondo è senza senso,
tua è la vera colpa.
Aspetta la tua impronta
questa palla di cera.¹
— Maria Luisa Spaziani

This collection of poems is organized around conceptual themes that have been inspired by three generations of Italian/American women in my family, women Gianna Patriarca calls, in the aptly titled, *Italian Women and Other Tragedies*,

...the women
who were born to give birth

they breathe only
leftover air
and speak only
when deeper voices
have fallen asleep...

[women who] serve their own hearts
in a meal they never
share.

(*Italian Women*)

My grandmother was born in Caserta, a small town near Naples, Italy in 1896. She died in the United States in 1974. She never returned to her birthplace. I did. As is well known, third generation immigrants largely have lost all contact with the mother culture. I am a third generation Italian/American woman. Many of the poems in this collection bear the mark of time spent living in the very culture from which these women came, making that culture tangible to me and no more just an accozzaglia of superstitions² and stereotypes. As a result, this work consciously avoids the stereotypical Italian/American

¹ If the world is without meaning,
the real fault is yours.
This ball of wax
awaits your imprint.
² On superstition, see for example, Russo-Demetrick’s *He Sharpened Pencils*; Vigliotti’s *The Burial*; Guido-deVries’ *Step on a Crack*. 
sentimentality of landscape, food, and family sometimes characteristic of contemporary Italian/American poetry.

for the white girls who tell me
Italians are loud …
– Rachel Guido-deVries

The mark of the backslash between the two cultures (Italian/American) represents a refusal to acknowledge the subaltern nature of either culture. In other words, my cultural identity, in the traditional sense, is both Italian and American. In some cases, Italian/American women poets see fit to separate their national identities from their identification as women. The Italian/American woman in their work is separate from the woman in their work. Guido-deVries, for example, dedicates the first third of her collection, How to Sing to a Dago, to blatant sketches of her identity as an Italian/American. Later, the author shows us mothers, daughters, lesbians, and wives, but never truly revisits the cultural marks which, I believe, are inescapable. It is in this sense, that the female identities transcend, but do not supplant, the national identities in my work. Woman appears in various guises on these pages. She is puttana and angel, she is mythical and mediocre, she is the bearded lady, the fat lady, the mother, the daughter, the mistress or the wife. And while the voice heard most often in this collection may be that of a woman, it is her very Italian/Americanness which places its hands on her hips and shouts to be heard.

She believed me to be many,
and i became whichever, and came
whenever, she called.
— Brenda Shaughnessy

Several themes occur transversally throughout the collection, acting as various leit motifs. The poems from *In the Middle of Things* address the complex issues associated with the family, the body, compulsion, emotional and physical starvation, menstruation and (in)fertility, disability/inability, and sexuality, among others. These issues manifest themselves in the houses of various female characters ranging from those based on the author and her own family to several mythical/historical figures. The symbolic nature of each of these themes is obvious.

A lei tocca ancora
contare i bossoli nella pistola
assicurarsi che tutto sia in ordine,
contabile fino in questo odiioso mestiere⁴.
— Marta Fabiani, *La Poetessa*

The theme of compulsion, particularly of counting, occurs repeatedly within this collection. In *The Yellow Carpet*, the author’s father lay dying and “counting the leaves on the wallpaper, praying maybe.” Later in the piece, the author’s mother counts aloud with a desperate, “one-two-three-four-breathe” as she and the author attempt to revive him. In other poems, counting becomes a compulsive act for the author. In one piece she describes herself very precisely as “every third button on your sweater” (*Swords & Swallows II*). In the poem entitled, *Leaving Italy and My Lover There*, the lover chides

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⁴ It is still her job
to count the chambers in the pistol
to be sure everything is in order,
accountant even in this hateful occupation.
Reason, with whom she is metaphorically reunited after a months-long separation, for his absence and his relentless precision:

When I forget my lines, you calculate the exact volume of my folly, tally my recklessness, rattle your abacus in my ear after I’ve gone to bed without you.

Later, she offers up as casual detail the exact count of the passengers on the plane:

I am all alone with two hundred and eleven strangers (here, myself included) …

What separates the compulsive characters is an awareness of their actions. The dying man simply passes the time; his widow and daughter count for his revival, the lover’s headcount of passengers is, for her, a seemingly irrelevant detail. However, other characters in these pieces appear to see more clearly their compulsion. For example, the victim’s mother in Cachexia “knows this counting has become a habit.” In yet another, the mistress collects her sins as if they are tangible things:

I’ve collected every one pinned its wings inside my hem…

(I am the mistress).

It is important to note that the image of pinning relates to the theme of binding which will be discussed later. On Discussing Compulsive Behavior with Fibonacci deserves particular attention because it is entirely built around the themes of counting and
compulsion. Leonardo Fibonacci, a 13th century Italian mathematician, discovered the so-called Fibonacci numbers which are obtained by adding the two previous numbers in a sequence, for example, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, *ad infinitum*. The entire poem deals with “counting” as a symbol of compulsive behavior, with the author appearing in yet another guise:

I am the butcher
at this table,
calculating, blind ...

The butcher, like the victim’s mother, acknowledges her compulsion, the

betting and
the adding
(always adding)
that I do...

but is not ashamed of it. Rather, she flaunts the secrets that she has managed to keep and keep count of:

but [they] know nothing
of the knives
I juggle, nothing
of the breath
I steal, nothing
of the places
I touch
with one finger
sometimes, two.

It is no coincidence that Fibonacci numbers are graphically represented by the spiral which, of course, is a symbol of the womb.
I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric,
and I can do you blood and rhetoric without the love,
and I can do you all three concurrent or consecutive
but I can’t do you love and rhetoric without the blood.
Blood is compulsory.
— Tom Stoppard

Images of menstrual blood and references to (in)fertility appear frequently in this work.

Confessional poets such as Anne Sexton and Sharon Olds celebrate the essence of their
femaleness time and again in works such as *In Celebration of My Uterus* and *Love in Blood Time*. While a celebratory theme for many women poets, here, menses and fertility are treated rather unconventionally. At best, this author remains at a safe distance and looks on with both a sense of fascination and of disdain, often dissociating herself from that which, as evidenced in the following excerpt from Sexton, many believe makes/marks her:

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Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.

(In Celebration of My Uterus)
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In *Glossolalia*, the poet is cautioned against speaking the angry language, a sexual metaphor, which threatens to spill out. The figure of the Mother cautions:

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it musn’t come:
starve it, (who better to speak of starvation) and it
will shrink to
the size of your uterus (another thing they said
I’d never miss).
A fava bean --
no, more dense,
a collapsed star.
```
The view that a woman is measured by her fertility is an idea which transcends cultural boundaries. In Gianna Patriarca’s *La Vacandin*, a woman is ridiculed because of her inability to bear children:

> everyone calls me La Vacandin  
> because my belly is vacant...

> a woman without children has no home  
> a woman without a man is a guest  
> in her brother’s house

Despite my refusal to allow myself to be identified solely on the basis of reproductive capabilities, I, nevertheless, internalize my cultures’ assessment of a woman’s worth and often characterize the woman in my own poems as insufficient to the point of freakishness:

> ...half a woman, yes  
> she is. Nothing below the waist! Come see, come see, there’s Nothing there but what you might call Negative Space!  
> (*Swords & Swallows*)

In a companion piece, woman is, again, less than:

> *Bring me a woman.*  
> Surely, you said more  
> but it was all she heard,  
> filled in the word real  
> where there was only pause  
> because what was before  
> you wasn’t. That one was ill-equipped, underdeveloped, third world, a misfit toy . . .  
> (*Swords & Swallows II*)

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5 A dialectal name which translates roughly to “little vacant one.”
The difference between myself and other women, as this author sees it, “is always | in the womb” (Ibid.)

Let her be lean; she is perpetually hungry. 
Let her hold in her left hand a blue coat that belonged once, implicitly, to Envy. 
— Lucie Brock-Broido

The differences by which many women mark themselves are found in the physical. A woman’s relationship with her body is both the most sacred and the most profane relationship she will have. In this collection of poems, Woman’s body is a side-show, gazed upon most critically by the author. In Cachexia, woman appears as the Bearded Lady, in Swords & Swallows, the Fat Lady offers this lament regarding the Crow, her “carnival barker”:

    Behind the canvas 
    curtain the loud-mouth sits on my shoulder feeding me 
    chocolate creams and counting my teeth. 
    His feathers are even blacker inside my 
    quarter-ton shadow.

In the poem entitled, Waking is no pleasure, Sir, the author asks,

    Where would you have me 
    take my pleasure then, Sir, 
    if not in this wheelchair?

The body is a thing to be manipulated in these poems, by the characters themselves, and ultimately, by the author. Starvation is one way women lay claim to their bodies here. The most obvious and literal connection between starvation and the physical self is evidenced by Cachexia’s
...hungry teenage girls, thin

As the cigarettes they smoke to stave
Off bellies and hips. Until the laxatives
Make them small and beautiful, they'll carve

Birds' nests in their cheekbones and ribcages.

There are, however, more subtle connections to be found, such as those between starvation and ritual (a reference to Ember days appears in the poem, To the Only Man I Will Ever Love) and emotional starvation, which can be said to inform many of the works in this collection but is most obviously phrased in the character sketches of Starvation (in four parts). An underlying opposition which pervades this work is the conflictual relationship between two opposed “philosophies” of the body and of food: America’s ideal woman who is thin versus the Southern Italian giunonica beauty. Also associated with themes of eating and starving, are oral images such as those of the mouth, the throat, choking, obstruction, and hanging. Women swallow poems, spit out languages, choke on silence, eat objects such as clothing, bone, and chalk, they feed others and are fed themselves, sometimes forcefully, sometimes not. The subtitle to Glossolalia⁶, (chalk, ashes, bone), refers to pica, an eating disorder sometimes resulting from a deficiency which causes the sufferer to crave substances that are not fit to eat, such as dirt, chalk, or clay. The uniqueness of this piece is in its many layers. The matter at hand is the author’s “angry language,” her sexuality which, despite attempts by analysts, doctors, and mothers (ironically, both analyst and doctor in her own right) to stifle it, comes cut, comes up, comes. The woman, here, is bound: she has consumed that which is unfit for consumption, she is obstructed by that which others demand she keep down.

⁶ The linguistic term for speaking in tongues.
Witches were also supposed to close up throats mouths eyes or other body parts by knot magic.
— Barbara G. Walker

Closely related to the oral imagery and the images of the body is the theme of binding. Historically, knotting and weaving was the craftwork of women. Symbolically, the art of knotting was considered magic and was thought to control the forces of weather and destiny, and the cycles of life. In these works, images of binding and knotting persist, but do little to empower the female characters. Rather, women are bound culturally, sexually, emotionally, geographically. Here, women wish to “tangle [their] toes with roots” and be buried along with the fig tree (The Burial). A woman’s lament is sparked by the sound of the train whistle as she recalls her lover who is, “...still tied | to the tracks | where I left you” (The Humid Press of Days). In yet another piece, a woman’s own “knack for knots” is used to create the noose for her hanging (The Manner in Which We Free Ourselves).

While the collective images may be troubling, they are evidence of the unflinching gaze upon the disturbed and disturbing mindscape which reflects (critically) the culture(s) that inform the poet.
Works Cited


ON DREAMING OF REDEMPTION

The Muse over my shoulder
Is drunk tonight,
Pining for her lover
And belching in my ear.
She smells of ashes
And has discovered
She likes speaking
In such tentative
Tongues.

The Angel on my dashboard
Is raising hell
Raising her skirt
For the demon on the cord
Around my neck.
He bites my nipple
Until I agree to untie him.
Angel shakes her fists
At God who is too busy
Playing co-pilot
To notice her.

The Furies under my bed
Are full of panic.
They’ve misplaced their gear
And have asked
To borrow mine.
They cannot remember
The last time they were called
Down and want to make
A good impression.

The Sirens in my bathtub
Are complaining
That the water is
Too hot, that Poseidon
Is hiding beneath
The drain cover pinching
Their thighs, that
They haven’t seen a ship
For months and they fear
The mermaids
Are getting all the action.
THE MANNER IN WHICH
WE FREE OURSELVES (for M.W.)

Consider the throats of those women holding
Vigil for your soul: not latticed, rubbed raw, rough
Skinned. Their throats are strung with
Department store pearls, yours crude in plastic
Clothesline; bent-heavy as your shoulders
Must have been with the possibility of your
  Punishment — a weight
One hundred Hail Marys (recited slowly)
cannot relieve. This act
You have committed does not frighten me
As I thought it would. It merely
Commits to memory
  The proximity of rosary to ladder,
  The persistence of your slippers,
  Your knack
  for knots.
GOLDEN NEPAL

perhaps,
we met underground before
the revolution though you never looked
good in olive drab — licking off the ground
glass like bourgeois roaches from the West
End. was it you or Miller
who said that
near Aswan the sand is the color
of dancers’ nipples at Le Chat Noir?
was it Miller or you
who said that
my own tropic tends to spread
when exposed to air?
you held your breath
at the club in Munich when I burlesqued
for drunken soldiers with thick necks
who shouted ‘Hüte’ with accents we
could not place; my logwood stockings
ill-fitting but

coveted nonetheless.
you paint me
alizarin while I henna my feet, tyrian
purple with my hands full
of snails. jeweled, I’ve been
your maharani sipping golden
nepal, your trollop in red silk
garters, your

ooh
la la
odalisque.
this time, I’ll be Sybilla stripped
of credit, wearing only a straw
hat, chewing on Indian corn.
next time,
I want to be the archbishop.
AMANUENSIS

I am the scrivener
at this table,
aphasic, always mute;
unable to scribble
with the speed
that I need to record
each scream
that comes
from neither the left
side nor the right,
but some cord
    in between.
I have left no trail,
written all your words
on the (backs)
of my eyes — locked
    your lies
    your treasons
inside
my chastity belt,
placed the key
on the curled
tongue of the demon
who watches
    my back.
M O N A R C H S

I have considered and found
A mouth I cannot leave.
―Theodore Roethke

I am the mistress
at this table.
I am fevered, always
prone. I am
culpable,
accessible,
unwilling to atone for
the secrets
on my tongue
and these sins
between my legs.
I’ve collected every one,
pinned its wings
inside
my hem, my prayers
to god are laughed
at by the several
whores within.
ON DISCUSSING COMPELLSIVE BEHAVIOR WITH FIBONACCI

No one ever knew you martyred
love's hummingbird between your teeth.
—Federico García Lorca

I am the butcher
at this table,
calculating, blind;
waiting on the
Restoration saints
who've been
assigned to try
and pry this
dictionary from
my hands, these
feathers from
my lips. Seems
they heard about
the betting and
the adding
(always adding)
that I do, but
know nothing
of the knives
I juggle, nothing
of the breath
I steal, nothing
of the places
I touch
with one finger
sometimes, two.
GLOSSOLALIA (chalk, ashes, bone)

In the back of my
throat (push past
the teeth, those
little camp guards)
I am practicing an
angry language. It squats
thick, guttural, it tastes
of rust, of unwashed
genitals, it clicks
like knitting needles,
cicadas, like crutches,
it is double jointed, it
smells of the poems
I've swallowed
to keep them from
you, it obstructs.

The doctor says
it must come out:
excise it like
the tongue in
your sonnets.

The analyst says
it must come up:
an emetic, perhaps,
twice weekly
to begin.

The mother says
it musn't come:
starve it, (who
better to speak of
starvation) and it
will shrink to
the size of your
uterus (another
thing they said
I'd never miss).
A fava bean —
no, more dense,
a collapsed star.
CONFIRMATION OF FLIGHT
(bread for my patron saint)

Here, the angels
do the baking,
leave me to my

rapture
in the corner
of the kitchen, knowing

that I was once
like them; winged,
deft.

Now fallen, I
cannot taste
to repent,

I can neither
sift
nor knead,

I fear the ovens
and the fire
behind the visions

more than
the visions
themselves.
LEAVING ITALY AND MY LOVER THERE

Why so late, Reason?
I have already
soiled myself yet
you linger and grow
stale as a weekend guest,
a valet,
a dim editor,
a bright idea.

When I forget my
lines, you calculate
the exact volume
of my folly, tally
my recklessness,
rattle your abacus
in my ear after
I’ve gone to bed
without you.

You show up
months too late,
miles high when
I am all alone
with two hundred
and eleven
strangers (here, myself
included) and my
back aches from
the somersaults
I’ve done to cover
for you to tell me
I got it wrong. The
foot, you say, never
even comes close
to the mouth. It
stops at the gut
and kicks. The words
find their own way
out.
WAKING, SIR

Waking is no pleasure, Sir. 
In sleep it is always a matter of gait — I run into locked doors, I stumble over your lovers, I climb, crucified, again into your bed (each time easier than the last), and kick down the covers to make room for the fire.

Waking, my suffering goes as planned — spend my days masturbating instead of writing (though they are surely the same thing), harboring this criminal, worrying about the night’s narrative, courting contradiction (or it is courting me), assessing the morning’s wreckage, wondering how you manage to see such light in me despite my tries:
Love, you won’t mind that I’ve bricked all the windows, broken the lamps?

You see, I’ve no need for the danger of an uplifted chin.
I’ve no muses left to do my bidding, only a caser to count me and fold — too risky, no payoff.

Where would you have me take my pleasure then, Sir, if not in this wheelchair?
After all the nurses have fled and there is no one left to fuck, waking becomes a matter of desire — needing never as basic as wanting.

Simply put, it will be this — half-masked, the doctors will mumble there were complications.
Then, only this — there will have been a girl who worried you like a wristwatch. Your pinup, accidental, chronic, overfed. And she will tell them great stories of you down in the bin.
VISIONARY

There may have been a time when we exchanged souls. We spent hours in the bathtub, shy one clawed foot. The gun you aimed at my temple left a mark there, a small red bull’s-eye passed as a hive. The funeral parlor curtains nearly smothered me when you covered me to dry. If I had a cycle, your filth might have left me, been flushed out some time that month. But I am not the same as the others you have infected. I am the unlucky one who carries your sin like a skeleton’s finger poking my ribs. Sleepless, I fear your brilliant light will blind me. I stay awake nights to cut my skin and squeeze out seeds of blame. Hungry, your words no longer nourish me. I have outgrown your songs. Between our worlds is a yellow path of shame; you for having, me for not. Yet we are both a part of this borrowed family too shy to show its teeth.
SWORDS & SWALLOWS

The crow is a carnival barker cawing my secrets
to those I wish most to impress. He caws
primer and polish — that neither can cover
the bearded lady that I am. He caws to

harrow me (me!) — She’s half a woman, yes
she is, Nothing below the waist! Come see,

come see, there’s Nothing there but what you
might call Negative Space! Behind the canvas
curtain the loud-mouth sits on my shoulder feeding me
chocolate creams and counting my teeth.

His feathers are even blacker inside my
quarter-ton shadow.
SWORDS & SWALLOWS II

Bring me a woman.
Surely, you said more
but it was all she heard,
filled in the word real
where there was only pause
because what was before
you wasn’t. That one was ill-
equipped, underdeveloped,
third world, a misfit
toy, giddy with
mediocrity, too eager
to keep her secret
words to herself, too
dumb to see it coming.

Some Magdalen she made.
The difference was always
in the womb. Confessing
wasn’t the problem. It
was the remorse she choked
on. But she was buckshot, even
then. She was the kelp
beneath your feet. She was every
third button on your
sweater.

Now she is on her ass
in medias res
gravel-blind in the dust
you kicked up running
away.
THIS STINK

Call the Light Brigade
and the pit boss
Make us some lemonade
Contact the Red Cross
Whistle the whores
    off their windowsills
Get the priests
Call the plumbers
    your word, Sir, that you will
Gather them all round
    my bathtub,
make them listen to me whine.

I sing for this stink
where I’ve landed again

I sing for my papa
but the worms intercept

I sing for my mama
for the dark things she’s been

I sing for the cupboards
where your secrets are kept

I sing for my whippings
for the kindness of men

But the stink is inside me
not circling my head

And the cupboard is bare, Love,
the flashlight’s gone dim

Still I can’t help but want you,
even now, when I’m ill.
THE YELLOW CARPET

If I were asked to describe the morning we returned home
from the flea market to find you
on the bedroom floor naked and cold,
I might stick out my tongue to catch the salt and sweat
that collected on your lips while
you lay there, waiting, counting the leaves
on the wallpaper, praying maybe.
I might inhale very slowly, and file the sweetness
of toast and coffee, perhaps your last
meal, and decay in the recesses of my memory,
stiffened, like you.
I might retrace my steps around your body, circling
the imaginary chalk line, pale on the
yellow carpet, wary of the glint of steel I was sure
would be there; a tardy witness to your execution.
I might choke on your last breath, the one you held
in your mouth, the one that escaped
the moment I parted your lips to breathe for you.
I might tap my fingers to the sound in my ears, the rhythm
of your wife counting aloud
one-two-three-four-breathe
as she tried to wake what napped in the hollow
of your chest.
TAUROMACHIA

Because the man who claimed
To be my father wore red pants,
I cannot stand the smell
Of roses, do not drive
For fear I will misinterpret stop
Signs, wish each month
That the river would change
Color or direction,
Flowing in and in
To correct the deficiency
That bears his name.

I am the bull’s daughter
 Knocking over the new
 Wife’s Capodimonte with
 A swish of the flags buried
 Deep in my back.
TO THE ONLY MAN I WILL EVER LOVE

Why have I dragged you out again?
Almost always it is the urgency
of grave clothes and once more I
am underdressed.

The aunts corner me at the wake
trying to get me
to do my impersonation
of a daughter grieving:

 Your mum's gone crazy.
 Your father's not getting up this time.

"I know. Bedbug, doornail."

Oh, Papa, what's the matter,
cat got your tongue? Aren't you
proud of your foul-mouthed sweet?
What your Guinea coat-check girl
has become? You with an 'x'
for your left eye and a lazy
'x' for your right,
dead silent
(as if the dead have anything to squawk about)
and me hollering like some hot
gospeller from Mama's side
of the family, and you let
me, you let me go, you
let me go on.

What a gift this hysteria!
I shall pin it to my breast,
an orchid on my best dress,
meat and madness for these
lean Ember days.
MY FATHER'S MISTRESS

Stat magni nominus umbra.
-Lucan

Starving piglets suckled
the breasts of the mechanical mother once. Once before, thousands came boots heavy and loud
to offer themselves, the others as sacrifice to the great metal sow.

Semper paratus, their gurgling
Concubine, mammoth adulteress, her own red letter ironstamped. Night after night they set fires
in her cunt, crossing fingers, signing crosses Until juice flowed

hot Orange-red
menses. Lovers proud in lampblack skin romanced their looming mistress, Caressing knobs,
pressing buttons, back and forth, lever And switch, entering

saffron Bowels, creating,
extracting, pulling out of her epicyclic train. Once, before the bread was gone, Mother mistress
machine gleaming Electra moaned and squatted, Birthed incestuous

product, Long slender
javelin babies, fat cherub spheres, still born each one While a lesser woman
shed salt in a sterile marriage bed, Mate-shy

wondering When the fire
breather might devour the man. If in heat and fever and dance she would finally break
his back.

If she were to whisper The names of Old World saints instead of sleeping

would it bring Him home to her?
Once, after, the paler men came in worthy suits and shoes unworn to nurse the mother
dry. In her abandoned womb red ochre found

its place. She stands weary
Now, knees shaking Rusted carcass aching like Kali-Ma, shoulders skull-heavy, belly
full of lovers' bones waiting to recreate herself.
LETTER TO MY MOTHER

Shall we catch up? Several years I would not write your name but I am shipwrecked, my Dear, and it seems you are the only one who remembers to read the sand.

Mother, I think I’ve been drowning for weeks. Tell me, is it dark where you are? Do you still call yourself girl? Come, Siren, with your pissing and moaning, your caustic trill. Oh, my Unctuous one, my tiny exhibitionist, inhabit a while, sing me a fugue, it’s that forgetfulness I want most to remember.

Half your salvation is in your suitcase. A white-tablet kind of quiet where I will not be bothered by the postman and his secrets, the acknowledgments page, or this peculiar waiting that coughs me up here.

We are certain, you and I, of two things: each of us is an heiress, each of us is a whore.

Strange, how we tread this truth, this air the breathing know nothing about.
THE BURIAL

What must it have been to you, Nonna, this
Hard ground, its simple refusal to yield,

These spoiled leaves? We watched each season
When the tree was put down. For me, it was nothing

More than ritual, like the potatoes halved and
Held to our foreheads, or the lire hidden

Beneath the porch every New Year’s Eve. For
You it must have been loss, your life’s work

Buried, your papers burned. Did you shiver for the
Leaves, their skins stiff with the Atlantic wind,

The plump purple bellies of the fruits missed in
Harvest? What of la via vecchia did you recall

Watching your sons press the trunk down?
Maybe you saw your brothers instead, their

Backs dark with the late summer sun. Only I
Knew you wished to be wrapped close to the body,

Tied with a sheet still stained by the last funeral.
Only I feared you would throw yourself in,

Tangle your toes with roots, press your cheek
Close to the knot and join it in its slumber.
IN SAN MARZANO

A language does not exist (or has been forgotten) for what I have to tell you.

—Maria Luisa Spaziani

Shall I await the bloom? Compare the weight of my fruit to hers, the red of our tomatoes to the blush of your daughter’s cheeks? This fruit is heavier, sweeter, more abundant than any you or I has known.

These roots — matted, turning in and in on themselves, were comfortable in their confinement. I will bury them here only after you have reached your fingers inside, loosened the knots.
SURVIVING EDITH (for her daughter)

When I entered the room, not your room,
Your room was in your house, and this
Is not your house, I sat on the stool

At the foot of your mechanical bed. Your
Husband made this stool from wood
Scraps he found in the shed behind the house

Where your children were raised. It resembles
The stepping stool at my house, all I have
Of him now that my memory has grown

Older. My left hand, its wrist circled with your
Hammered silver bracelet, a gift at sixteen,
Rubbed the rough, splintered edge of the

Stool, its seat worn smooth by the backsides
Of six children, punished at different times, for
Different reasons, and I accepted my own

Sentence, to sit here at the foot
Of your bed, atop this drained electric
Chair as your daughter, my mother, sat

For the last three days watching your narrow
Ribs rise and fall with labored breaths, ignoring
Her own need for air, feeling tricked by the slow

Hiss of the air mattress depressed under
Your eighty pounds, your eighty years. Only
You were there then and the clear tube carried thin

Gold from beneath rubber sheets, the waste of
One who stopped eating weeks ago. And my
Punishment is to sit here blind. Not because

Of the dark, but because you are dead.
Dead, I say the word and spell it loud as if at
A grade school bee. I can’t find home and

You won’t stop whispering in my ear until
I can find you, something of you to take
With me like the pastel eggs I hunted in your
Garden. Blue and green shells hidden in
Snaking grapevines too frightening to enter,
To gather. Where is your garden now? Where

Is the talisman, that secret egg I will barter
At the gate, the place where you are, if you
Have gone anywhere else? I search under the

Feather tower that pillowed your head for
Visitors and doctors and home health care
Providers and elevated your knees and ankles,

Birds’ bones wrapped loose with fraying
Ribbons that could no longer circulate
Aspirin-thin blood. I find nothing, not you,

Not your hair comb, your water glass,
Though I strain my eyes in this dark room
And lower my head to accept this punishment

That will outlast me. The lamp is too
Far from this corner, the light never
Bright enough to replace your own.
WINTER, I AM AMAZED

Winter,
I am

amazed.
Each time

we try
to turn,

even
after

all those
lessons,

we fall.
Perhaps,

clumsy
lovers

like us
have no

business
skating.
THE ONLY LANDSCAPE POEM I WILL EVER WRITE

Diametrical us, even
the rain falls slanted

today, chiding my
window with hairpins,
careening my widow’s
frame like the slalom,
two matchsticks and a wish.
I envy cross-country,
tenacious, rapt as a
novice. Yet I interpret
omens windward,
read the tarot for
women who want queens
among their past lives,
navigate our course by the
bumps on your head.
THE SPARROW, KNOWING MORE

than either of us,
turned
Her back
when you walked past.
Perhaps She saw Death riding
on your shoulders, knocking nests
from the trees with His calf-
skin crop.
Sparrow, She
knew this: you wouldn’t
live to unlock the door
though you finally made
it home.
Midnight, and I am listening
to the train whistle
as I have each night
for days, wondering
if it carries
body or bushel
of unidentifiable resource,
whether the conductor
is as tired as I, whether
it will ever arrive
at its destination, how many
years late
it will be when it does, or
if it is merely the ghost
of a train moaning
to remind me
that night has fallen again
and you are so far away
still tied
to the tracks
where I left you.
THE LAW OF RETURNS

You came in through the front door
(That should have been my first clue)
And asked for a glass of wine
To chase out the chill that had
Found home in your bones. The cat
Got up from his clothes-pile bed,
Looked at you with his good eye,
And turned one half-turn from West
To East to find the warmth of
The sun. You shook the snow off
Of your shoes and left the small
Berger to melt on the wood floor.

Since, I wished you gone. Still, your
Pool of ice-shock lays and waits
For my stray bare step, my worn
Wool sock to find it near the
Rug's fringed edge. Your grey frost hangs
Here to spite the sun and still
The wind in this house, She whines
And howls, hoarse at the back door
To be let out as you were.
SESTINA FOR THINGS UNFINISHED

We chat politely in the warm kitchen
The backyard fills with snow and steam
Thoughts drift and I cannot hear you
Speak  I see only the white cat
Who has come to peer in my window
For a moment, there is no sound but the kettle

Tea leaves swim inside the kettle
It seems the cat designs this kitchen
From outside and is still when I clear the window
Our space is warmed by clouds of steam
Rising from cups while we watch the cat
Who mews at us through damp glass   You

Have come because we’re out of time   You
Sensed the urgency of my thoughts   Perhaps the kettle
Will offer guiding leaves   Only the cat
Knows what I want and the door to the kitchen
Keeps him silent   His breath is steam
Singing my secrets to all the herbs in the window

Betrayal sits loud as yellow on the sage in the window
But your vision (as always) is poor   You
Cannot see the lies that collect like drops of steam
On each strand of chive   In the iron kettle
Chamomile stews in hot water (like me, in this kitchen)
And my envy is the shade of the eyes of a white cat

A confession scratches my throat but the cat
Calls me from canary herbs   The window
Is covered again and I am alone in the kitchen
Wanting nothing more than to spare you,
I wish you gone from here   Like a guilty kettle
I begin to sing with hot white steam
STARRATION (in four parts)

I. Avery reading The Second Sex while “socially working”

she moves quickly
through their stories their excuses their lives
there is no time no need to reflect
she eats amphetamines to keep her mind
sharp and to keep her body from collapsing in on
itself she can be heard at office parties saying I’ve slept
with every man here
(no matter how many)
chances are she has she wears feminism like armor
but can’t make it work she dreams of kissing
the backs of deBeauvoir’s knees
as her sisters call out her name
for the cause

II. Lilith with plum sauce

she speaks Cantonese to impress she says
it inspires better tips each night she drinks
a little more to sleep not to dream
she has a child a girl she will not speak of
in her attic place in exile she
entertains young men
fledglings really
drawn to her like a lodestone her sentence is
to chronicle every miserable thought
(there are so many)
but when she writes the words come like
zephyrs and the sacred nine stand outside
the garden wall and call her name

III. Jane at fifty in white with guilt

she answers ‘serious’ to all the questions on
the psychological evaluation gross
passivity ensures the fulfillment of her needs
(they are not many)
interaction
distraction
she knows little about the doting stranger who
visits each day only that the stranger brings
cigarettes and that the stranger is good to her
she regrets most but resolves nothing she is
too young to play proper widow  too old to play bride  she wishes instead to disappear beneath the veil   
black or white  
and come out clean as she hears  
the groom call her name from the urn  
on the mantelpiece  

IV. Tilda sore on a Sunday morning  
she sings Negro spirituals at Sunday school  
she lost two pints of blood the last time  
she was late  won’t leave because of god  
and no money  
in church she cleans for Him  Murphy’s Oil  
swirls sweet in swollen nostrils  
she owns ninety-nine Hummels and displays  
them proudly for visitors  
(they are few)  
the hundredth will be an angel with stained glass wings  they come after punishment  
so He never goes hungry  her eyes are squab grey though lifeless since ‘72 when He broke her ribs  her words whistle through uneven front teeth thanks to the banister  
that broke her last fall  she believes in right to life  

even His  
as she waits patiently and listens for her name to be called
CA CH E X I A

I dream the bearded lady on the wide
   White canvas side of the circus tent
Whose sons soak in jars of formaldehyde

In the adjoining tent. I dream Sa Khet,
   The fisherman’s wife who sells her youngest child
To business men, their porcelain palms wet

As washing stones, their money greener than
   The river Trêng. I dream the violet
Soap cakes and want to wash my hands

In boiling water to rid my sloppy skin
   Of Father-smell, of purdah, of Teheran.
I dream the hungry teenage girls, thin

As the cigarettes they smoke to stave
   Off bellies and hips. Until the laxatives
Make them small and beautiful, they’ll carve

Birds’ nests in their cheekbones and ribcages.
   I dream the victim’s mother who will save
Her daughter’s pubic hair, Scotch taped to pages

In a leather scrapbook on the coffee table,
   So visitors can touch the wrinkled edges.
She knows this counting has become a habit.
THE CRIPPLE

So many others in this
crowd, and you chose
me to see-saw to, you
with your Cubist
face and your foreign
tongue, and I think you
whisper

_ilm cinque, non è ancora arrivato?
_and of course I know
nothing not your
language certainly not
the bus schedule
committed to memory
on day two
because I am
trying to think louder
than the shouts
of the teenagers in
the piazza, their tongues
usual and lazy in
their girlfriends’ mouths
and the English
in my head

_go away, god, please make him go_
_and I have to put_
the groceries I am
carrying on the ground,
first the paper bag
of eggplant in my
left hand, then the pretty
ribboned box
of sweets which I
will feed to my healthy
lover (ten fingers, ten toes)
after dinner, then the American
newspaper under my
arm and I have to squat
beside you on the
cobblestone, beside you
in the pigeon shit, beside
you in the shade
of the duomo
just to hear because
you have half
a jaw, and yet I love
you and would probably
marry you if you
could only reach
my ear to ask
for my hand
THE GIRL, FOURTEEN, ASKS ME

Why do you write poetry?
How do I tell her it is because

I must use up some of this time
I’ve borrowed, peddled my ass for,

stolen, suckered others out of,
etc., because despite how it has

been had, I have too much, because
I am a glutton with my fat face

lapping the bowl, because
it keeps my head out of

the toilet, keeps me from masturbating
all day, or playing Chinese

water torture alone in the bathtub,
because it is much less trouble

than trepanation (though the pain,
I bet, is exactly the same), because

I have everything to do with
explosions, or because it

is time that might otherwise
be spent on a killing spree?