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The Woman of the Street

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THE WOMAN OF THE STREET

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Creative Writing Program

by

Deborah Brink

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M.Ed. University of Massachusetts, 1992

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In memory of my mother,

Antje Elisabeth Kaiser

1943-1996
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Introduction

The most impacting art asks more questions than it answers. It’s a poem that presents a world, a sliver of a moment, and changes the reader’s way of feeling and perceiving. It’s a painting that presents an image of life that leaves the viewer to wonder about his own life, ultimately to grow more conscious and live with deeper connections. The artist, at her best, calls us to some kind of action although the action may be internal, and leads us to grow and heal.

My first experience writing poetry with a teacher was at the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequence, in Boston, Massachusetts. I was in my late-twenties, excited and curious about this two-week long gathering of writers with some tie to the Vietnam War. That experience helped me to further understand the work of the artist: to bear witness and remember. Several University of Massachusetts faculty members founded this writer’s workshop. They wanted to help veterans make sense of their experiences in Vietnam and to promote peace between countries that had been at war. It was during my third summer at this workshop when Bruce Weigl helped me to go beyond where I had gone in poetry up until that point and to lose myself more. I also began to better understand how poetry can promote healing – both for the writer and for the reader. I heard Vietnamese poets read their work and heard stories of the many Vietnamese soldiers who had died with handwritten poetry stuffed into their back pockets. Carolyn Forché, Grace Paley, Martin Espada, Kevin Bowen and Tim O’Brien also read their work, each voice offering stories of witness, a perspective not quite the same as one I had known.

How, I began to ask myself, can I write about what is important? What can a poem do? Why write poetry? I encountered poets who taught me more about this art, in books I read and also while sitting in a smoke-filled cellar in Cambridge, Massachusetts, this emerging slam scene where I watched enthusiastically as others performed. My imagination began to take over, and here’s where I would need to continue – into worlds I didn’t yet know. Art was a vehicle for discovery, and I had to trust. If a poem began
from a memory or from an observation, it need not stay there. Part of creating art is sensing when to leave lines out – whether the lines of a poem or those in a drawing or painting. A reader needed to feel something, and this became my measure. The poetry I liked best shook me somehow; it made me feel. I wanted most to use language as a painter uses charcoal or watercolor, to create images that lead the “reader” to reconsider some aspect of life.

Many writers have inspired me. William Blake a first “favorite,” wrote about mystery. He wrote about heaven and hell, friendship and love. I liked his rebellion, his refusal to go along with the dictates of his time, and I felt his care for life in his lines of poetry. “To be in a Passion you Good may do, / But no Good if a Passion is in you,” he writes in “Auguries of Innocence.” His poetry is about the making of meaning from a life, about examination of the spirit, of god, the child’s innocence, and often about living full out, with passion and in search. Forever in his poetry, he reminds his reader to question response to authority and assumptions about where we find answers. He sees the danger and damage that occurs when we, often out of practicality, ignore voices, especially youthful ideas:

He who shall teach the Child to Doubt
The rotting Grave shall ne’er get out.
He who respects the Infant’s faith
Triumphs over Hell & Death.

The child has much to offer but must be allowed to dream and to see as he sees, and Blake’s art reminds us to respect this innocence – which energizes us to create.

Denise Levertov is another important poet. I love her speaking out. As the USA revved up for another war, hoping to “rid the world of evil,” I read Levertov’s speeches. In one from the Vietnam era, 1970 in Amherst, Massachusetts, she called people to unite in order to create a more humane world and said, “Now the peace movement must become the revolutionary movement.” She continued in a later speech addressed “To The International Meeting Of Writers,” September 28, 1980, in Sofia, Bulgaria,
... we must recognize again that the Earth is our Mother. If poets cannot understand this, who will? And if we do understand it, then indeed, we have a role to play, a task to perform: we must use our poet's imagination and our gift of language to bring these realizations to others.

Not only do I like these speeches, but her poetry — especially some of her earliest work — is the artist at her best, calling her reader to notice details. She wrote with clarity about people suffering. She demanded that writers write about their beliefs, that to be afraid or stifled by rhetoric and hyperbole wasn’t an option. She and Blake wrote from a similar love of life that challenges us to go beyond immediate comfort and to question. I admire them both as artists who care, feel and work from what matters most to their lives.

Writing against war and calling for justice can lead to pedantic lines that condescend, but Levertov’s political poem from the 1960s, “The Distance,” protests her adopted country’s behavior in a way that keeps me reading and informs me so that I want to grow more aware. The images do not please:

While we are carried to the bus and off to jail to be ‘processed,’
over there the torn-off legs and arms of the living
hang in burnt trees and on broken walls.

While we wait and sing in ugly but not uninhabitable cells,
men and women contorted, blinded, in tiger cages, are
biting their tongues
to stifle, for each other’s sake, their cries of agony.
And those cruel cages are built in America.

She was appalled by violence and by the abuse of power the wealthy use to exploit the poor. She understood her duty as a writer: to take responsibility and ask the same of others.

A much quieter voice, Jane Hirshfield also calls her reader to become more conscious of herself and community. I first heard Hirshfield read at the Skagit River
Poetry Festival several years ago. I had read from *Lives of the Heart* and her anthology *Women in Praise of the Sacred* and loved her meditative reflections nurtured by a Zen Buddhist practice. She is often asking her reader to enter into a moment with her but rarely leads us to a trough, a watering hole from which we *should* drink.

Hirshfield’s mastery of the short poem appeals to me, such as in “The World Loved by Moonlight.” This poem is one I read over and over, never with quite the same response:

```
You must try,
the voice said, to become colder.
I understood at once.
It is like the bodies of gods: cast in bronze,
braced in stone. Only something heartless
could bear the full weight.
```

She urges her reader to question, “What is heartless?” She doesn’t tell the reader what to think or feel but offers images for a reader to reflect upon. Hirshfield, as an artist, isn’t so different from Blake or Levertov. All three invite the reader to know moments more intimately, to better understand motivation and choice, and to grow more aware of our lives and their effect on others. These artists influenced their communities not only with words but through action. They lived purposefully and learned to use their art to communicate their vision to others.

I write poetry in order to make sense of events, emotions, and conditions I witness in myself and in my community. I write to know myself better so that I can live more consciously, cause less pain and create more hope. I write to better understand others and to take myself into realms I can only travel in dream and while creating. In this collection, *The Woman of the Street*, I have written about what is important to me, about the people I have met, imagined and remember as significant. *The Woman of the Street* isn’t a single person, and she doesn’t live only in Madrid. She does not judge us as she watches us walk by – whether we smile her way or pretend she does not exist – and she
knows us as we can know her if we ask enough questions. She has surely colored with crayons, dabbled in watercolor, smeared charcoal of some sort, and she is a collage. The sections of the collection honor the woman of the street while offering a tie to the visual world. The poems present images, and the reader can see as she will see – color, light and shadow. The section breaks occurred as I examined the poetry and realized the influence of visual arts on my process and in my reflections.

“Crayon,” the first section, includes poems about childhood and family, and poems related to growing up but not only to childhood. As a medium, crayon, is inexact and is a difficult and most often youthful approach to creating with words, color and pictures. Though crayon can lead to rich texture and compelling images, it can be messy, inaccurate, and sometimes impossible to erase – much like memory.

I call the second section “Watercolor” because these poems move beyond the stage of family and into an even less definable world of people met on the streets, in a classroom, or at the beach. Watercolor offers both more possibility and more complexity. While children playing often paint watercolor into abstract images onto a sheet of white paper, a skilled artist can create more sophisticated and controlled portraits and landscapes. Watercolor can easily blur, and this group of poems presents a growing orbit of people, places and scenes that merge.

In the third section, “Charcoal,” lines become deeper, sometimes pressed so hard onto the page that the paper begins to tear. Charcoal is without color per se, but there is much depth. It invites a reader to imagine, to feel the shadow and the heat, to visualize color that could appear if the film wasn’t black and white. On a canvas, it gives the audience a rest from color and invites the viewer to see from her own place of beginning. Many of the poems in this section are about relationships, but they become more abstract and less definable than many of the earlier poems. They are less often narrative or about particular people or scenes and more often investigative.

The final section, “Collage,” includes poems of travel. Collage seems an appropriate title for this section because the poems emerge from the crossing of cultures, time, landscape and language. The texture of the poetry itself takes on shapes that bring together events and styles presented earlier in the collection.
These section titles do not intend to categorize one poem from another but are offered for a reader to consider as guide and question.

Art that captures my attention usually changes me, ever so slightly. Many artists create in order to make better sense of their own world. I write to survive, to keep somewhat sane in a world that often baffles me. I write with the hope I will somehow better love, empathize more with others, learn patience, and further awaken my imagination. I learn more about myself, the environment, my community and relationships through the act of scribbling a draft into my notebook or composing lines onto a computer screen. My hope is that poetry I create – and my process as a writer – will offer more healing than harm. Along the way, I will encourage others to write, speak, act and discover more possibilities for their lives, to fall in love with some life they didn’t know as possible yesterday – to understand themselves better. I work for the same.
Crayon
She Told Stories

She told stories of groups marching,
   cries against war,

courtrooms where boys were sentenced to flee,

said find something you love to do,
   a way to make it,

   eat greens,
       cook with olive oil, real cream,
       keep potatoes crispy.

   watch movies –
       notice when fingers warm.

She bought sketchpads, pens, pencils, watercolor, clay, novels,

   warned, we would need imagination,
       to say I

am not sure just now
   (and still hold on!)
       forgive me. . .

It’s a fight I can’t fight,
   boys back on the street

       Run! Run! Fast!

This is not always a land that loves you.
Radiance

She walks with eyes to tile floor, from band to algebra, nodding politely at each “Luca – you look so good!” from her girlfriends, even a teacher. Boys’ voices change as she feels eyes on her knees and shoulders, can hardly continue through the six class periods. This is the last time, she tells herself. Why did she agree to buy the lavender dress at the Bon Marché and bikini, still in its plastic bag, blue with fine stripes between breasts and hips, not enough to cover the hair below her belly? Why was her mother so eager that she wear hardly anything to the beach that summer?
Bread & Butter

Each day for at least one year

the child eats nothing else

walks from one door to another

the school yard in afternoon

feels wind cool her scalp

sees others swinging high

jumping rope

sliding fast one into the next

hollering laughter

unpacking their peanut butter sandwiches

chocolate chip cookies

as she

gulps water

reads a few more words each day

one foot against the other

learning again to balance

bread & butter
The Nurse

A bandaged head weighing me down
I learned to keep eyes low, hold my breath
when she entered the room,
   kids lying around,
   needles by their sides – fear for brothers and sisters stuck
in the  lobby waiting
on Halloween,
leukemia Greg gone down under,
green letters and white light,
one visit less for her each round.  
   She once caught me playing solitaire
with cards left by my uncle,
   If you don’t rest, she warned,
   You’ll be here forever.
John

to all the children who endure what they can’t yet understand

Nights of shooting Pool
   rainier beer bottles along the window sill
   Mother calling us for dinner
   friendship trying after Berlin’s bullets

   He watched us shoot baskets.

   until garage door opens
   car inside
      a man
        all the dogs, cats, hamster

two men wanting
   to keep the other alive
   after The Wall

   nothing nothing nothing
   anymore.

   He never laughed at Dandelions in a vase.

   Big sister takes little one’s hand
   past neighbors’ eyes
      sirens into the house
         someone shaking and blowing
            into the man.

   He placed them on his basement window sill.

   from Georgia swamps
   Cypress knees alligators
      a hospital bed
         two children
            wife wanting

   so many lives taken that day the garage door rose up.
Waiting for Anneliese

A thin drugged smile asks when they’ll let you out of here. From around the bed someone asks about Mainz, your childhood city, to change the subject. You have tried often to tell stories about your grandma, her plump fingers holding yours along Rhine walks.

With laughter she pleaded for you to run fast through ruins, fetch bread from her favorite bakery, stuffed coins into tiny palms. Later she would braid your hair into silk.

Without her, you could never have survived, you say, tears down your pale face. She never liked Hitler, had warned your mother to stay away. They just have to figure it out themselves, she would tell you, as you hope we can go beyond these decades shaped by fears, silence, shutters, that we might stop such cells from taking over bodies, memory.
His Book

In a foreign land
this man almost 70 years old
holds a paperback
novel
    spine
    with bold letters:
    his native alphabet.

Not in years have they seen
him hold
pages bound.

    After dinner
    along with fire crackling
    words echo from his palms –
    stories he can comprehend
    sitting still,

no other voices
or pictures of people moving on a screen,

the first time his son
has seen
this man.
A Family

Icicles hang in blue sky light
not yet melting
the pain of imagining
them gone
these who shouted
the other night until
doors slammed

as no others
can.
From Inside a Shoe

At seven years old, dog at her side, dressed for Johnny Cash, she sings loud, microphone in hand, dancing, ignorant of Nixon or Democrats. Her mother and Aunt Z sit talking in the kitchen. The girl soon tires of her performance and begins to wonder of the women’s talk, then weaves cord, blending it with rust carpet, her dog watching as she leaves the mic strung from coat closet, propped covertly in a tennis shoe, then proudly pushes “record” and “play”. The winding tape captures laughter, then words of hide-n-seek, Mother’s stories, finding Andreas in the dark – how she loved play under her rules, to kiss him on his boy lips – then explosions much later: tanks, barbed wire gone through fields of daisies where they’d slept as children. She doesn’t know where he is now. Someone hears the machine click off, and her father warns: a tape recorder can cause damage she can’t undo. He then places the toy-machine on a top shelf, to keep the girl from further temptation. She opens a notebook, begins with pen.
Learning History

Was it hard to leave him, drunk? Had he dropped bombs? What about youth groups, airplanes, the birds those years, death camps—watching them fly away? Did you see trains change lives? As a child,

did you know anything? I want to ask if she knows these films I see in 7th grade—hands held high, human flesh stuck through, but my parents say she won’t talk of this past.

Don’t bother her, they tell me. And I can’t yet go beyond directions, fear silence in the mornings, my mother saying how young she was when she had us. Now, too late,

I know to just ask, even when questions aren’t welcome—ask. Watch faces. Move close. Touch the old woman’s hand, and know you can’t know what you would have done. Ask about her birds outside the kitchen window. Tell her you want to understand. You’ll love her through, like those she feeds each morning. They wait for hands to give seed. Let her speak to us now.
The Oxygen Man

She whispers
with still eyes, tired,

"Tell them to speak up,
*normal* – loud as usual
– or I feel in the way.
I'll go away."

She gasps for breath
between each phrase
as I walk into the next room,
a filled, fluorescent kitchen,

and tell them they must talk
as usual, leave
the kitchen and don't act like
Mom's sick.

Soon the tank arrives
a man's voice bellowing
as he strings tubing
throughout the house,
shows our mother
how to point the plastic
up her nostrils.

"This could change
the rest of her life,"
he tells us.

"Oxygen is not a drug,"
he assures her. "You can’t get
addicted."

We all laugh.
Cooper's Hill

Not much has changed since I rode my bicycle up Cooper's Hill—where cows roam and the bus stops.

In those days fewer cars drove past,

but some people lived and others were hit by cars, even then.

Up Cooper's Hill—where cows roam and the bus stops I discovered how to change gears, pedal fast and taste ripe blackberries. In those days fewer cars drove past, but my father warned of the danger.

I discovered how to change gears, pedal fast and taste ripe blackberries from my bicycle to the top, zooming across open prairie.

My father warned of the danger, but I saw a horizon, with Mt. Rainier behind me.

I rode my bicycle to the top, zooming across open prairie where some people lived and others were hit by cars, even then.

I saw a horizon, with Mt Rainier behind me.

Not much has changed since I rode my bicycle.
Watercolor
Markings

Don’t just write what you know. When you find the box of letters, read them until you’ve had enough. Write what you want to keep. Write what you don’t understand. Write what scares you in the night when the cat sleeps on your chest purring, and you can hardly breath as claws extend. Don’t be proud. Keep all photographs sent to you in the mail, and look at them from time to time. Don’t wait for more. Notice what invites them to arrive.
To Please a Child

for Clinton

Under so many rocks we find crabs
living their way,

camouflaged
grays and browns.

Then a green back captures the young boy’s
curiosity:

He picks up this life between fingers,
soon tosses the masterpiece –
claiming it the world’s
tiniest scavenger –
into the tide

up and down the beach.

How does it feel to be
a small crab safe under a rock

suddenly tossed in air?

Do limbs
split?

Are friendships
broken?
Possibilities

for Levi

You join the circle, sit with your 4-year-old hand tugging one next to yours, both set like blossoms upon your right knee, squeezing fingers as teeth of your first years show their lovely hunger. You ask when can you play the drum set in the classroom’s far corner until your new friend’s hold falls away. You take this gift from the young teacher who wears a dark pony-tail, blue jeans, red polo, grateful for doors you smell opening to amber, lilac, lavender, patchouli—words you don’t yet know, trees, snakes away from giants and monsters, your blond hair shaken loose. As this forest-day ends, the comfort of your first love will return to take you back, let you eat all the tomato and fresh broccoli you can swallow. You will tell stories and continue with the drum, these days before you ask questions and watch faces that make it harder and harder to do what you love.
The Neighbor Boy at 5

for Trevor

He often greets me, hanging around to play ball or just pull weeds together, as I drive up, the other kids too old to romp these neighborhood streets. Today I say to him, not expecting any reply, “Why do people drop garbage in my yard?” I sound the tired of after work as we toss foil wrappers and paper cups into a plastic bag, piece by piece from below rose bushes and around my small city green. Then he tells me, pausing first, “Well, it’s just that they don’t know you yet. You’re new here, and they don’t know who you are. Just wait. Next year they won’t do this to your yard.” He smiles, reassuringly, watching my eyes.
The Rocking Chair

for Carolyn

You say it’s one of your best memories,
when your first boy couldn’t sleep for days, when

it took medicine 48 hours
to ease the pain in a child’s ear. His

crying would stop only against a warm
body. You had been holding Chris for two
days, rocking him, the worn velvet under
you, his hot ear against your heart beating,

the sun rising dimly as tears wetted
your face. You hadn’t slept for a long time

when the door opened and your neighbor, your
mother-in-law, walked into the room. She

had seen the light in the house and thought you
might need to sleep. She took the boy into

her arms so gently that he hardly felt
the change of comfort. You go, she motioned,

as tears flowed more and more until you fell
asleep in the dark room feeling like no

human being could love you more than this.
Navel to Navel

Sometimes
the waterfall
overflows
onto a wood floor
as if you and I wind
from the inside
sweatshirts
silk
falling under pines
near a forest pond
where no one
sees us
roll from grass grown tall
into sun-heated water
where we
pretend
to disappear
no ambition
but this.
Moving Day

for Rich Turner

You recall her saying once

we won’t always want
as we want now,

her photos packed,
sisters calling,

still
to ask how you
are

too shaken to listen long.

There’s no
hand-holding
as bodies move
room to room
couch, bed, dresser, boxes
packed into truck after truck

only awkward breath

waiting to say

this too will pass.
Firewood

Not since 1969
has snow stayed
the month of January.

On days like now
he needs a tool,

buys the saw:

Will there be enough?

In the cellar
he cuts

pieces

smaller
short
enough
for the oven
stacks them even

says
sit here,
get warm,
closer.
The Twentieth Essay

for Karen Turner

If you ever feel the building begin to shake,
it's me reading, probably,
the twentieth essay
-- but maybe the fifth.

I want to know why this writer
mentions his dog in the bathroom
barking, and why he says
he'll never go to see a movie alone
again. I can't find the connection.

In the next she writes
it took her some time
to decide on just the right
topic, and it appears in the third paragraph,
"I believe,
and according to Anyon it's true
that all butterflies will fly
eventually
if cocooned for long enough."

I can't stop so go on to a next.
This time I'm hooked: This student writes about how
the tree of life begins early,
and it's up to you to climb
the oak or cedar—whichever you prefer—
steadfast and with faith
that spiders and wasps do need
each other, that basil isn't basil
until we smell it growing
on the front porch,
and she doesn't know why we write these essays
with such dumb requirements
like a thesis and facts to back it up

because it's an illusion
that we control anything at all.
Tell me so I can believe it, she writes, in the final paragraph,
and call it what you want. Find a way out
of whatever has captured you
so that you sit in some classroom, in a ballpark or bar,
hoping someone will show you
your next destination.
A Lesson at School

She hears students sitting near her say their parents never came to a ball game, their mother made deals late, and Dad cooked meals for the Schnauzer.

She sees their eyes light as these brothers look to each other, “Did you have a Schnauzer?” they ask her as if they’ve asked this question in unison before.

“Ours had such good taste,” one says. “The only drawback: he didn’t like cooked brussel sprouts, so Dad never cooked brussel sprouts for us until Douglas died.”

“He cooked them as a sort of joke at the memorial. Have you ever heard of such a thing—making light of the death of a terrier?”

“That’s the kind of thing I’ll never teach my children,” the other says.
Finding Words

Before you let a character speak,


go to his body:


touch his boneless shoulder
to yours


then his feet in sandals
to the oak floor
in his favorite coffee shop.

Let his blond-haired hands
touch your forearm,


fingertips intertwined as he says,


*Your curves*

feel so different from my body.*

His ear presses to your thigh,


your fingers to his embrace,


white shirts fall


into breath,


a yellow bedroom
where faces blur,


flute and clarinet
with keyboard


light into evening


wintering maple
as he opens his eyes


wondering how he arrived.
Charcoal
A Man I Think I Would Like to Know

He was a man who wanted to know how it feels to walk into a street where so many people are gone next week.

He was the one in the corner watching no one in particular, counting how many of the words ending lines

were strong sounds
made a feeler feel
showed any effort at all.

He told me so many times over the years
I have misunderstood
too much:

we would both and all
die too soon.

He said
we know this,

yet still try to make sense

like farther in distance must be better.

He was a man whose footsteps wanted to be noticed,

a man who I didn’t know I needed to know,

like the Narrows Bridge, Interstate-84, mountain roads in Italy
scuba diving, rolling a kayak,
being alone with you

all night and then the next and the next.

I want to

go through them now,
move toward those places I avoid
like questions I had forgotten for so long,
I had yearned to ask for so long

until there is nothing,
nothing

left to push.
The Law of Hospitality

Hawks fascinate people
their circling
pictures & words
talk
of war more
mineral rights
gas & oil
forget rising
& falling
oasis
considered neutral
place of rest
from fighting
between tribes
wanting
always wanting
but follow
the rules
a leader
commands
& don't be
impatient
she warns
some people
learn places
refuge
others losing
possibilities
fearing
deserts
themselves
the well
spilling
wind
story
soul
sand
cloud
hawk.
A Dinner Conversation

You

without doubt

say no

each of us doesn’t

do our best.

I think

(meaning you)

we do

always

though rough

dumb.

How then

you ask

could she let him:

whiskey

piano midnights

our bruises.
Considering a Form of Overpopulation

The committee smiles at their colleague’s request:

    to honor the visiting writer
    with a tree.

They could choose
    vine maple, an oak
    or Cedar of Lebanon
    (though that one’s outrageous, she knows).

They warn of technicalities –

    say soon

    all writers

    will expect

    a tree in their honor.
Sustenance

Baking
bread

you burn
fingers

in oven

pot holders
catch fire

until water
steams
Near the Columbia, I first watch barges pass,
their power pulling and pushing barren steel,
waves onto sandy beaches
   50 miles east of the Pacific – along with salmon
   up and down that river
   where water teases kayaks
   away from our campground.

Changing paths leave us to find our way
back to a bridge we saw in sleep,

under stars passing – silhouette of mountain
in any direction.

We run, grab at paddles floating,
   hope we can keep our balance –
   Douglas Fir,
   houses hidden,
   Alder groves nearby –

the ability to disappear,
the emptying of Trojan¹,

its promise.

¹ Trojan was Oregon’s only nuclear power plant. It operated for almost 17 years, from March 1976 to January 1993. Portland General Electric (PGE) owns the Trojan nuclear plant and is responsible for its decommissioning. The Trojan nuclear plant is located on U.S. highway 30, approximately 12 miles north of St. Helens in Columbia County.
Kibosh

Knock Krishna because he kowtowed to Lakshmi
And see results in the keel of your
Boat, as rocks from the sea near Kowloon
Break kindred voices that kvetch over knots
Able to keep a knuckle-head from a fall that could
Land it overboard, knee-deep in knavish
Absolutes, such as a final story telling of the knockout
History of Klamath and its fall for kef and kingfishers, all

Determined to adapt the ideal of an Israeli kibbutz
Into the state of Southern Oregon.
Here & Now

One doe on the edge,

its eyes on my feet,
    sliding closer, slowly
    leans my way
    through tall spring grass.

Then a second, a third appear,
each stepping an inch
at a time as I wonder

    what it’s like
    to be a wild thing
    now

with so few left here
    where we’ve measured
    our two and a half acre plots.

Could it be
    they’ll trust me still?
    Have they seen shooting,
    do they recognize loss?

One’s antlers have begun to sprout.

They don’t know what comfort they are.
After Summer

The wound is where
the body’s work
is vented

strange
never healing
to be the same

We sometimes ignore these
for a long time

(Why do we make an idea
of death?)

We often think
no one else
will hear the story

What interests me more
is what you the living
do at night

when you close the door
eat dinner in quiet

what you say
to yourselves
Who Makes These Changes?

_after Rumi_

This cup stays full now, hot here – burning through – until you sit again near, then sip it dry.

Once a week I walk the dogs along trails nearby, thick with needles – you, this path, breath dry.

You work hours cutting branches for a better view – then searching for seeds to dry.

When you pull back covers and look out this window, air hot, you see snow fall, mountain gone – winter sky.

This moment is not your last chance to see into night, not the last time to sip – alert to each droplet – as if dying.

If I lift the pot off the fire fast, less water steams away – and we can pray – then sip it dry.
For the Peace of All

Let dollars lose their wear,
stories be told by heart.

Let all wheels fall
into a Never-Never-Land,
so that we learn again
to touch feet to mud
carry our lives
taking
only what we need,
leaving
enough.

Let power be lost,
lines go limp,
language, muscle, coins
—all that make us unequal—disperse.

Let all celebrate in each other's joy,
the resurrection of an old house,
or the birth of a neighbor-child.

Let all bow in silence
for miscarriage,
anyone's loss.

Let trout and strawberries return to the wild,
to Cedars of Lebanon,
the island of Palawan,
so each can gather
again what she needs.

Let us remember what it was like
when we were the strangers
on the other side
without warm cover,
hoping most for corn to feed our children.

Let us remember.
Collage
Counting Palm Trees

She knew fathers who had refused to speak to sons, brothers who wrote only letters to brothers, said they could be polite when they met at funerals, for example,
or a nephew’s birth. She watched women at the tienda passing neighbors with eyes to sand, met farmers on the island who lived next door to each other but refused to even argue. So wives went silent also, water buckets balanced, cousins hardly knowing cousins – except for when one had been too drunk or whose fault it was – passing day and night, sometimes at the cock-fight. When the rich brother came from the south, after their mother’s fall, a child spoke of the family fighting over who owned the palm trees, for their share of the copra: one lame, one tired from digging clay roads, the other admired for his letters, their cleverness – how he could write. When he came to visit they would avoid his eyes, never told of the land’s vengeance on them.
You will not believe

a ghost,

as angry as when Edick was a boy,

took our goats

in the night, three holes

each neck.

The boy choked on air,

hardly ate rice, no coconut milk for weeks,

until

we visited her each morning

on our knees.
Place of Water

for Daisy

I. Plenty

They called this village “Ponong” — place of water — walked steep paths with buckets and sacks, dunked bodies clean, and returned with as much as wanted.

Children and women ambled each way, hardly noticing season’s change, shade under mahogany, mangos falling, plenty of coconut-milk.

Boys and men climbed palms, built houses with fronds, drained Tuba for drinking later near the sea below, bare hands catching tilapia.

II. The Harvest

Farmers and children prayed for rice from one paddy to the next, bent backs, seedlings square.

Feet thrashed grains over bamboo onto mats woven, into pots for steaming until the village could plant only corn seed one year and then the next, soil like powder into the ocean.

III. A Form of Progress

Corn grew in the fields year after year until few kernels sprouted as the path was paved for motors. They planted poles, wove wire along now-barren slopes, for light. Children left for cardboard boxes, hours holding tiny pieces of chrome between forefinger and thumb, placing parts together so someone, in another country, could buy a Timex cheap, know the hour at a glance, and a woman working here — a woman a lot like me — could send notes home to her village asking about the moon, longing to walk in its shine after a long rain has cleared the heat.
Avoiding Mindanao (or: the forbidden land)

1. Filled with Fiery Sun

And when you die
    you fall down
    from a sky that seems so clear
    at last blue

    filled with fiery sun as if
    it should now go on forever

    as if
      good luck
    a star gazing on you
    for you

    a holy spirit contained

as a Gecko for the Filipinos who carry it
into unknown territory only to be told:

    the lizard brings
    no luck
    no hope
    no memory
    of dancing together
    nor ghosts
    to haunt
    or protect
    as Grandma promised
    because soldiers
    will convince them
    they’ve believed
    in the wrong god
    for too long
2. Before You Die

You now lie under the newest knowing:

Skepticism
wasn’t necessary

It could really do nothing

Others would believe
whatever they wanted

and you spent so many years
worried about whether they’d

buy your story

as if you'd rise again always
no matter where a sun set

if only they would believe

3. We Taught the Children Well

The only time killing is acceptable:

when strangers come too near
want to take our food and daisies
from fields grown wild

ask us to pray together
under their light
but won’t listen to ours

chorus of shotguns
after a marriage we thought would last forever

mockingbirds
sounding as wolves
memory’s wishes
to roam free
4. Carry the Gecko Close

In the forest we hear marching:

Hundreds in step carry fire

They've been told to control their people
    find who wants out – in these evenings
    when men hold other men

    tell children of important work

where fields could grow corn and wheat

I listen to them call

    and carry the Gecko close

Some finally say

    Please tell me when the story ends

    I need to get some rest

    Won’t you tell me when I can rise again?

    I promise to behave

    I won’t wander again

    out of truth
News While Traveling

The light
Of the closed pages, tightly closed, packed against each other
Exposés the new day,
The narrow, frightening light
Before a sunrise.
George Oppen’s Of Being Numerous, #28

Where mahogany grew, children now climb
clay hills,
yearn for the singular,
and I follow them,
and later invite them to follow me,
watching faces.

The letter I had read said, She’s recovering fine,
as I stood in the post office of this new place,
where scars rise
from the heat of this island –
with weeks between us:
Its what I had yearned for.

Where mahogany grew
there is no reasonable
explanation, and When
did you become ill?
No one told me what had happened,
and here I walk where miles of mahogany once lived.

Are you afraid now, I want to ask,
knowing you would never tell me
knowing I might want
to come home if you told me.
So many times
you knew what you wanted.

You opposed these lights
couldn’t march
but said you would never forgive them
– no justifiable war.
You knew, they would not stop cutting
unless you awoke before they were ready.

You began with crayon, then water color
all over a canvas,
charcoal all over your hands
then body
    reverence
    against them falling.

You sought still,
and I sought behind you,
and she is fine a letter says,
    though we know it cannot be so simple,
    the frightening light of pages opening
    and she is fine, a letter says.
Varanasi Winter, 1998

She did not notice grim lights or the stench
only breath and touch,
cool water splashed onto her back,
a ragged sweater circling bone,
me learning how to be near
this holy Ganges.

The Sister had called me to bathe
this shrunken, bone-thick woman,
her body resting on a cot,
skin gray, gazing
as she took my hand
when I sat beside her.

Praying to hurt no one more,
I wanted to please this stranger
who had only days left,
gentle smile as she felt for my muscle,
me trying to keep still
to help this woman
let go
like I had never let go

to be here
in a way I had never been
to stop memory,
forget time.
Red Wine

Bremen, Vor Dem Steintor, 2003

1. Beginning

It never sounded like this before,
    street cleaning
hoses all over the tracks,
glasses of wine,
    glasses of wine
white and red.
You, back in the apartment tapping keys,
    think maybe
    the phone will ring.
    I watch,
        write each word from memory.

2. Piano (As Sun Sets)

It’s the place I was told to sit
    in the café past tracks,
    an area where streets
        are torn up.

Allow time;
   Imagine you do know
     what they say.

    Only a child stares, says
        that makes no sense at all,
(No one cares what wine you order).
3. Piano II (by Ear)

Rather than ask a question,
each syllable anxious

    like California
    withering
    as leaves fall,

    the tongue discovers something new
    and what you knew

    before now:
    etymology of a word
    not so important

    nor the origins of grapes.
Revisiting Diego Velasquez

in Madrid

If Margarita marries,
he would become king.

Voice small, she begins to tell her story,
knows a man who can help others
write books.

They want to write books
over Migol y vino
en de noche defras de lunes
(in the night, after the moon.)

She tries to listen, knowing
she should be further
especially in the air,
not like a child
(no mismo la muchacha.)

By now she should know her way—audible
but waits:

it should not be a strain
onto a page,

a getting around, recognition,
him shutting the door of her study,
holding the hands of their children,
and she watching as they walk to the garden,

though she would be queen.
While Eating Gazpacho

Over lunch
I am reminded,
Teresa of Avila
lived near this city:

her rules and cold feet
crawled
four years
until she again walked,
speaking just one hour
each day.

Now,
sisters may wear wool socks
in the mountain winter.

When a letter arrives
all are welcome
to read the words.

There is no privacy,
in the way we expect it.

I see you
turn away,
want to forget
this kind of desire.
After Granada

for Irmgard in Bremen

She returned home, slept,

tells us those could have been her final days:

In her mind, eyes closed, she is surrounded by rose gardens

of the Alhambra.

Faded into night, her feeling continues,

Yes, this is a good way,

nothing more

could I want.
Monastery de Encarnacion, Avila

Why do they choose to sleep and sit on boards only inches off cool tile,

speak one hour a day— no newspaper, novel, radio?

But they know –
a woman from nearby assures.

Some of them traveled Europe before beginning,
others worked as doctors and teachers.

The first words one nun spoke on a voting day,
*Who is this Ross Perot?* she asked her brother who had mentioned him in a letter.

They only go out on a few occasions,
and family crowd to visit in the streets.

Saint Teresa, paralyzed by early grief,

recovered when she returned to the monastery crawling on her knees.

There is a waiting list.
They pray hours each day,

must share all letters,
wear coarse habits in the heat of August,

– no heat in winter –
but how they sing in the morning

from behind screens in the chapel.
The Woman Of the Street

for the woman near the Hotel Recoletos, Madrid

The woman of the street gazes
into our passing eyes, boxes tall,
wide face, broad shoulders, skin olive,
a radio, we looking away.

She sees the first hands letting go
of our hands, a father’s gentle touch,
a black hound, warm fur nuzzling
a child’s feverish body,
gone one day to never return.
She watches others pass,
smile wide, thick fingers turning the knob –
music only enough for her ears.

She waits here, no sound, back leaning
against the air. Then I see me –
planting corn seed, simmering garlic,
a summer long ago, side-by-side
with one who said never, no other
could feel so much like home—water falling,
planting corn seed, garlic, meals
we would share with friends who would fill the house.
sweet onion, tomato fresh into the wok –
she there picking berries from a bowl,
sipping wine, watching the passing.
From her stage I know how hours change us,

skipping pebbles into a pond, rock into the sea:
how I wanted to throw them.
Rock into the sea, one by one at the top
of her lungs – she wanted to throw them and then not

and then more after daylight. She runs barefoot
across miles, as long as forever
until nothing familiar—she hopes.
Town by town watching people,

neighbors changing, carrying brothers,
a sister, her mother’s face, looking at them
from time to time, ashes offered into the sea,
resting here, Flamenco dancers in her lap,

never too loud, no words asking
for anything. I pass by – banana, plum, cucumber
weighing me down,
as I walk the concrete

in the heat of Madrid, her face fading
as others fade. In my imagination
the woman stands and calls
for me to stop and give her one of my fruit.

Tomorrow she moves east one block,
three south, never long in a place, one by one
at the top of her lungs – and then not and then
more after daylight, wide face, broad shoulders.
When Night Is Hot, *Caliente de Noche*

I see the same in others:

They look intent,
away.

Straining to read a street sign
they say nothing,

then
okay, okay, *puedo, adios*—
I can, goodbye
how goes it?

*que pasa* – just read the map—

*por favor*
please, say please!

(the map you carry)

Pages unfold,
some study lines
color—

control

falls out of reach.

Count blocks
until

Paseo de Juan y *quiero deseo*:

I want, you wish.

This is where *I am*!

as home, just now:

*casa de sol*—

sun ’til midnight.
Vita

Deborah Brink was born in Tacoma, Washington in 1965. She earned her B.A. in English Literature from the University of Washington in 1987. After two-years as a Peace Corp Volunteer in the Philippines, she earned her Master of Education (English) from the University of Massachusetts in 1992. She currently teaches English at Lower Columbia College in Longview, Washington and travels when she can.