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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

B.A. University of Washington, 1987  
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 7<sup>th</sup>  
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 breathe 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

## West

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 Trojan<sup>1</sup>,  
  
                     its promise.

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<sup>1</sup> 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  
to 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.

**Village Blood**

*Ponong, Siquijor Island, Philippines 1990*

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  
Exposes 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:  
            It's 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.*



## 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 deseas*:

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.