

## **Five Poems, Five Places**

### **My Mother Is a Mountaineer**

My mother has climbed Mount Everest.  
She summited by way of the Southwest Face –  
a brutal slog, but pluck and grit and a sturdy build  
helped see her to the top. Now an afternoon storm  
has whitened out her view, and she is stranded  
high above the South Col. Only night will come down.  
She sits in a snowdrift, waiting, as I set out  
on my own ascent, base camp far below me.

## At the British Museum

Stand at that handaxe on display.  
Imagine the clever hominid  
who fashioned that cutting-edge technique,  
but also call to mind a kinder biped  
on the savanna, an early-feeling female  
who saw the stone device but could not see the point.

The story of the spearhead in that case  
should not omit the tender savage teen  
who shied away from sharpened ends.

Where are the artifacts that show  
the dissent of man? When the dig is done  
and the items cleaned and catalogued,  
only the ghost of an intuition  
will hint at some resistance  
to a tool for which the age is named.  
Shall we insist such unease was in vain?

In ancient Lydia there was an old priest  
who held in his palm that very coin;  
who stared at the hard, brilliant token  
of the first gold standard in the world,  
and despaired at the way it devalued  
the fragile currency of love.

## **August in Paris**

Beside a stone base  
of Eiffel's brown tower  
I saw in bloom  
a bleeding heart  
with two pink pendant flowers.

Imagine the sight  
of form and symmetry  
that rose before me.  
Something lovely made twice  
at my knees' height.

## Lawrence Avenue, Chicago

I cycled past a promise of cash  
on a sandwich-board outside a door:  
*Compramos Oro*. Inside that sign,  
like an ox in its yoke, there stood a man,  
a Mexican in wooden-wear.  
You may pity this human prop,  
and wonder if he left behind  
a mother fingering her beads; if he  
breached a border in a mango truck  
for this: to become a beast of burden,  
an illegal to mock in the public stocks;  
but consider this: in his hands  
as I rode by was an old, folded daily,  
and he read intently last week's news,  
his elbows held up by the heavy board.  
He was lost in a courtroom or a football score,  
when I found myself on Lawrence Avenue.

## Transition

The door of our frame bungalow  
intervened between the welcome mat  
and a basket of slippers  
you insisted we put on inside.

It was the door unhinged  
soon after we moved in, a plane  
of scratched lumber sanded  
and stained and returned to its jambs,

a load of old oak enlightened  
by panels of glass. I could see you  
through that door approach with groceries  
you handed over on the porch.

However, when you pulled the brass knob close  
for the last time, I chose not to look.  
Did you pause at the door before stepping  
forever out of the family frame?

Two years went by. One evening it rained.  
Coming home in wet sneakers,  
I shut my front door and proceeded  
past the slippers-basket,

tramping to the kitchen and back  
in street soles that dampened hardwood floors,  
breaking an ancient rule and wondering  
at the silence that surrounded me.