

## HOUSE OF CARDS

*January 1871*

When I was in Richmond I met a man.  
I touched pulp where a sword had pierced his eye,  
dressed the bloody bruise of his crushed thigh  
where hooves trampled his femur and pelvis. I caressed  
his fragile parts to health until his hard mouth broke

into a smile. I dream now that he commands me  
to escape my father and brothers, run back  
to Richmond. But before he left the hospital  
for the battlefield where he died he asked me  
to marry him and I refused. I don't regret it.

I've learned too much belief in any man,  
even a good one, can drive a woman mad.  
The night when I dreamed he lay on me  
and I screamed so loud I woke with Daddy  
and the boys standing over my bed,  
I told them it was nothing.

It's hard to be the only woman  
in a house full of men. I wept last night,  
and when I opened my eyes the stars  
were beginning to fade in the dawn light.  
Come spring when the quince is red as passion,  
I'm determined to set out on that train,  
seeking nothing. I'll never marry. For now

the quince orchard lies buried under snow  
and a crust of ice thickens on the river.  
I'm done looking for portents in voices,  
tea leaves, dreams. I believe in the cold, real  
and sharp. When I walk this morning to the coop  
the hens make the soft clucking sounds  
that comfort me The rooster puts his beak

**House of Cards (continued on next page with stanza break)**

### **House of Cards (continued )**

under his wing and goes back to sleep.  
I steal from each hen a warm brown egg  
and follow my footprints in the snow  
back to the house. The weight of my family  
settles on me like a shawl crocheted of iron.  
I head to the kitchen to boil coffee.

Daddy and the boys will say it's too bitter.  
When they come in from milking the cows,  
drop the load of firewood for the stove  
they labor to keep burning all winter,  
I'll add cream to theirs and drink mine black.

## **BAD**

*Spring 1870*

Mother didn't like for me to climb the mountain,  
warned me of black bears, ghosts. Now she's gone  
I wouldn't mind meeting either just to know  
I wasn't alone. Beneath my wool skirts my legs warm.

Quince perfumes the air, crimson, sharp as pepper.  
The gnarled apple trees grow delicate curls,  
white petals like my baby brother's fine blond hair.  
The wind chases clouds over the mountains.

I can't imagine a world without me or the mountains.  
Some folks might call it selfish, but what has come  
to pass is so different from what I thought  
I don't mind what folks call me. There is in me

a flame, a fire I used to be ashamed of,  
that keeps my mind from wandering  
at the creek where the path doglegs right  
into valley ruins, a melancholy patchwork

quilted by women's hands and passed down.  
to daughters. On her death bed my mother's  
barbed look snagged me as if she knew I'd turn  
from memory like a man towards reason,

run away from what was certain as the home  
that once held me fast, beloved as Priest mountain.

**TOP**

*September 1870*

My father helps to gather apples, little gnarled  
things that'll last all winter baked into pie.  
While summer lingers I stew them with rhubarb,  
ladle into a white bowl, covered with cream,  
the summer fruit that slides down the dark throats  
of brothers raw with weeping. For six months

the frogs' croak from the river winds up  
and stops, a toy that topples instead of spinning.  
Daddy repeats *time to plant, time to harvest*  
and his words fall short of meaning as if  
something were chipped or missing at the bottom  
of him that sets thought gyrating into the world.

The men and boys won't stop looking  
as if they were waiting for a miracle  
but all I can do is boil the clothes with lye,  
wash the dusty floors, put food on the table.  
I skip church on Sundays when other girls float  
in taffeta to church on Norwood road.

Through crepe myrtle's blazing branches, I watch,  
and bite a tongue of iron. When I feed the pigs  
I slap the sow so hard with the rusty pail  
that she no longer comes running for slops,  
squints at me with knowing eyes. I don't have it  
in me to believe a thing except the secret

of silver I saved nursing soldiers in Richmond.  
Next spring I'll lay ten coins on the palm of the man  
at the train depot with the tin roof that flashes  
in the sun between the river and the church,  
run away to nurse again in Richmond, instead  
of a heart lay the rest on the kitchen table.

## ALTAR

*Richmond 1880*

I was just a girl, could never hope  
to make the sun rise and set by milking cows  
My body wouldn't chant the silent prayer  
of broom-work and feather duster. There was

a hardness in me better suited to dressing wounds  
or stopping the flow of gushing blood and pus  
than to mopping floors. Years after I ran off  
I knew myself flawed as if by making me God

had left a chink of doubt for men to slip  
through to nothingness. Twice, though I knew  
it meant wearing the men's rage 'til death  
like shame at the flesh that cloaked me,

I almost went back and didn't. I went to work  
in hospitals nursing the sick to whom I didn't belong.  
I still wonder at night what happened to my kin,  
but wear my concern lightly as a crust of thin ice

that melts in the April sun. Sometimes I think  
with what I've understood I could have borne  
to stay except I've learned that mother love  
left behind that day the train pulled away

from dwindling mountains isn't enough  
to keep anyone at home.

## RED SEA

It was just me and the bleak world  
of scrub pine, red clay, rattling husks  
of dead sumac. It was just me  
and the massive earth and the stone house

no one had lived in for a long time. My life  
a fact, without illumination. I followed  
the yellow dog up the overgrown path  
to where the bare Virginia mountain

crouched under the heavy sky,  
turned to walk the three miles home  
down the same road I'd come.  
The Blue Ridge turned red, then

a pale yellow without the usual  
crescendo of dusk. I heard laughter  
like the bones of winter sun.  
My daughter had been gone months,

her childhood, a sea  
that had parted  
and swallowed up half my life.  
What was I doing alone

on this mountain? The grey sky  
let go of snow, releasing its alphabet  
of wordless understanding  
that fluttered through the remaining light.

## **GOOD-BYE**

Good-bye third floor room with maples leaves,  
green seed-pod that taps the window,  
morning mist swirling over the James River.  
beautiful light, thunder on the mountain.

Good-bye ash tree, sumac, wisteria.  
Good-bye blackberry bramble.  
Good-bye yellow dog, Maizie.  
Good-bye peace.

Some say peace is carried within,  
but can I fold up valleys  
and take them with me?  
Can I fold the James River,

the light, the blackberry bramble,  
the yellow dog, and the maple tree  
like silk dresses I slip into my suitcase?  
Can I unpack a mountain?