

## In Kerema

I always wondered how she could let  
flies walk along her skin,  
crawling over her lips  
along her brows as she waited  
with the others every day.  
I used to think I would never give  
so much of myself to another being,  
not even a fly, but then, seeing how  
her eyes clenched shut at my touch,  
how her lips would not form  
words for over two years,  
I knew that she would not either  
if she had the choice.

At the hospital in Kerema  
there are no patients.  
The women huddle  
on the coast of the Pacific  
tending to the infants that  
continue to come  
even if their mothers do not.  
There are no toilets. There is  
no running water. In the ward  
there is only one incubator  
that has been taken up  
by three writhing orphaned triplets  
so the others sleep outside.

Every morning, Annie and her mother  
pull their pants up high,  
cinching them tightly with belts  
as they travel the road to the highlands.  
Her mother told me  
in the village they cannot say  
they are going to Kerema,  
the rape clinic, for fear of dishonoring  
their name. The stigma saddles  
heavy on the people,  
blackbirded and razed,  
primed in a history as brutal  
as the floods that rage through,  
washing away homes and men.

In Kerema, most of the time,  
the best we can do is grant them  
their legal-medical certificates  
and hope they return. The last time  
I saw Annie she wet her finger  
with her tongue and rubbed  
at my skin trying to remove the paint.  
She took her mother's hand for the walk  
back through the highlands.  
Along the road the forest is dense,  
men chop down trees, slicing into them hard,  
making contact with their axes  
but not their eyes.