

APPROACHING GRIA *

I am raw umber
burnt sienna
alizarin crimson

cleaving
to the stem

on nights so cold
the fresh wood
cracks in wind.

And you are hard
limbs canting
from the bole,

accumulated rings
unmarked, dark
girth impervious.

Hidden
insistent fingers
work toward
our destiny:

the avid earth,
black as

charred ivory.

* *Gria* (Greek: old woman)

THE POET

to my grandmother, Eleanor.

She never read her poetry aloud,
that I recall. And yet I do; I can hear
her low voice, feline and reserved,
as if holding herself back. I recall
her sprawling breasts, the ample hips
over unlikely fine legs, small hands
with lacquered nails that flickered
as she knit. A seamless tumulus
of afghans, sweaters, hats and toys
for children she never knew, children
she missed. I settled up against her
on the old blue couch, as the grownups
met on some neutral ground, discussing
anything but the sit-ins or the war
or Birmingham. Their voices blurred
as I leaned in close, grew hypnotized
by her clicking needles, her femininity
stitching a slow, smoke-smelling yarn
over untold wishes, unspoken memories.

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NULLIPARA

nul·lip·a·ra (*noun*) *A woman who has never given birth.*¹

I am gill-less in a sea of the alive,
an ocean of female forces, dark and green.

This deprivation is ancient, biblical,
back to the days of fire pillars, ashes.

I feel too modern to be sistered back
to Sarah, to Elizabeth to time...

yet time is the deep that drowns the heart:
I see a burgeoning belly and cannot breathe.

Too basic to explain or understand,
I can only strive not to inhale the sea

then struggle up to gasp unholy air
and catch lost lullabies above the surf,

A primal music sorrowing this loss:
My songs of unforming—
 ungrowing, and unborn.

¹ *The American Heritage® Medical Dictionary* © 2007, 2004 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

AT THE LAMAS' TEMPLE IN BEIJING

(written while enroute to adopt our daughter)

Joss sticks, intentions
incense, wishes, broken hearts
the Lamas' Temple.

Dark, sweetly smoky
ornate divinities loom.
Massive prayer wheel creaks.

Scrawled and ardent prayers
stipple the smooth, ancient wood.
I stop, hesitate –

Who am I to pray
here, a stranger from the West?
And yet I reach out,

cautious, in need of
a connection to our child:
Keep her safe, I pray,

not knowing to whom.
Worn by centuries of hope
the wheel moves, murmurs.

Keep looking, looking
the Buddha seems to whisper.
She is just ahead.

DUCA*

(in Buddhism: suffering caused by resisting loss)

It lurks behind distraction,
snags our peripheral sight,
even in joy. Reveals itself
at disrupted times:

A buried hollow, howling
to be filled. The sudden
gasping spill of loss,
the dreams
of hemophiliac tears.

Disoriented, edgy,
you try to speak this feeling
to yourself: This is only
the thirst to fall in love,
the longing for a heavy womb,
the desire to rise
through undulating light
slanting through glass
on winter afternoons.

In the failure of naming,
you surrender at last --
falling without parachute
into the primal pitch,
astonished to find
that you are not afraid.

You never land, exactly,
but settle slowly
and at last
into a strangely altered place
of knowing without reason,
without any explanation,
that your heart is larger now
and you are home.