

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: White Flowers

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I think of the act of writing a poem as a ritual--the precise timing, the arrangement of the steps following one another until it becomes a whole, an eternal return of the way memory works. The poems are a means of walking--often blindly, hesitantly--into the self as into a cave, vast and complete, and the only light is the flashlight in my hand that shines into a dark corner barely letting me see the images that quickly disappear before the light. The darkness, defining, takes on a life of its own, so that the act of writing becomes listening to the silence within the self as if the past can only be retraced by hand. The central event in the speaker's life is the death of her father. This book is framed by his presence, as the poems in Part 11 are her attempt to hold the past in place.

WHITE FLOWERS

by

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DEDICATION
TO MY MOTHER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART 1

	Page
Raven	2
The Streets	4
In a Cafe in Austin	5
My Grandmother's Funeral	6
Siva's Dance	7
To Anubis	9
The Frog Prince	10
To Daksa the Most Auspicious	11
To Siva with Love	13
Back to Seed	15
Resting in Peace	17
Cutting Water	18

PART 11

A Sequence--For My Father

Siva's Boon	22
Cleaning the Fish Tank	24
White Flowers	25
In Loving Memory	26
Returning	28
Echoes Behind Me	30
Underneath the Wooden Scales	32
Furrows	34
A Broken Wall	36
Three Matches	38

PART 1

Raven

For Buddha

In the garden between dawn and sunrise
There is a raven who will point the way
But only for a price. It ruffles its feathers
Waiting for me...for my question.
But I can't walk past the two snarling dogs

Guarding the gate. Once, its teeth grazed
My finger before I shut the gate, the blood
Darker than when I raise my hand to the sun.
You are sitting under the tree,
Your hand blocking your face as if you don't want

Me to recognize you. I stare so hard until
You blur and become the raven flying away
With the rest of them--a black cloud over me.
After my father's death, I watched my brother
Weave the newspaper into the glasses,

Packing them into the trunk. They said,
We must be good, not give our mother trouble
Now that we are all she has; my hair ruffled
Like a crow's nest, and my brother said,
"How many eggs are you hatching?"

But I couldn't pick up the baby bird
That had fallen from its nest, the bird smaller
Than my fist, the wrinkled skin bruised
On one side and the legs at an angle. The mother
Bird never came back even though I waited

By the stoop, the baby bird screeching.
I dropped a stone on its head, blood and flesh
Slowly blackening like the newspaper print
On my fingers, the whorls sharply defined.
Your palm is raised as if inviting me

Within myself, telling me not to be afraid
When I wake up in the dark, the birds outside
Chittering, the sky black, yet streaky like a fire.
And I climb the wall, sitting on it, with my legs
Dangling on the other side, afraid to jump.

The Streets

I don't know if it is dusk and the light
Is ending, or if it is early morning
And the grey light is just beginning,
But this girl is walking on an almost deserted
Street. Perhaps she is going home.
I, too, have been walking, it seems forever,
Trying to ignore the catcalls

And invitations to be driven home--
Watching the cracks in the sidewalk,
My hands buried in my pockets.
The street is sepia like the buildings
Barely keeping itself together with crooked
Doorways. And she is walking away from it--
Her hands clutching her shawl.

The man, leaning against the doorway
And barely listening to the other man,
Is staring at her like the house at the back
Of the street with its four pitch black
Windows like the empty eyeholes of a skeletal
Face. And I try to ignore them,
Looking straight ahead, their eyes

Like pinholes on my back, and I hug my coat.
The shadows drown the light,
And in the background a man and a woman
Are sitting by a doorway and talking
While she breaks vegetables, for dinner perhaps.
And the young girl, scared, walks fast--
Her white dress sweeping the street.

In a Cafe in Austin

On a warm October afternoon
After the rain has swept the street,
I sit in Les Amis drinking my ubiquitous espresso,
Trying to read Malraux in French.
In the corner of the cafe, a young man reads Kant.
There is a faint air of sadness about him,
As if he has had an unhappy love affair
And is trying to recuperate in a civilized way,
By spending time with the great philosophers.
Behind me two students are arguing
About life and living.

At dusk candles are lit
And they flutter on every table.
His face, veiled by candlelight, flickers remotely.
Then the masses arrive dressed in Polo shirts;
They smoke and drink Heineken.
He departs,
The jacket on his arm brushes against my leg.
I stir my cold espresso
And try to finish Psychologie de l'Art.

My Grandmother's Funeral

They said that she had stuck her spoon
To the wall, and stood by the coffin accepting
Condolences, worrying about the expenses,
While the undertaker waved away the flies

And wiped his bald head with a folded handkerchief.
The candle by her head dripped wax
Onto the flowers and the cat refused to budge
From under her. They were her children,

Grim-faced, making weak jokes of who was going
To die next, as they had buried their father
And a brother a few months ago. It was a succession
Of deaths every season as if God wished

Accounts paid in full at regular intervals.
The cat howled when they took away the coffin.
It was her time, they told each other,
She hadn't suffered much discharging her debt

To God with ease. And they fought amongst
Themselves when they divided her furniture,
Grousing about it for years--
As if it was a retaining fee death had extorted.

Siva's Dance

The linga has been bathed in coconut oil,
Rinsed in milk--
The priests have said prayers over it
And the women have prostrated themselves.

Worship, it seems, flourishes in prayer.
You push me over to the altar to place
The flowers you had bought outside the temple.
Outside there are crows cawing and stealing

Food, rows of slippers and shoes left unguarded
On the doorstep. And I feel brittle,
Like parchment, trying hard not to crumble,
Dragged by you here the way the sun

Moving through the sky will drag the moon along.
We have been ending for some time now,
Trying desperately to keep what we cannot.
It was your idea to come pray to Siva, ask him

For a reprieve as if you are Kama
Whom Siva burnt and then reignited without his body,
Because, he said, love is in the heart.
You are standing beside me, your head bowed,

Begging for time arrested which will give
You a gift--of love, life, death?
You will not say, not even to yourself, asking
Me and I say, flippantly, "Beware of wishes

Coming true, you may lose your life too,"
Wishing that dreams can make a lighted window
From outside look like Siva's dance
Of creation ending into us.

To Anubis

They say you guard the gate the dead must
Pass through asking from them a tithe,
As if being dead isn't enough.
I have been waiting for you to quit your drinking
And gambling and other things I won't get into
And pay attention. There are so many
People waiting to learn their destiny.

They converge on the gate every morning
Hoping you have decided to do your job.
But no, you are out there fucking Isis
And when you tire of that you stare at dirty
Pictures suckling your tail. Is it true
You and Bacchus can screw twenty-one girls at one time?
But that's irrelevant. Who are your superiors?

I have decided to lodge a complaint.
Life out there was a mess. No, I am not blaming you,
But I thought death at least would be easy.
There are pictures you see--
Of serving girls and mulled wine and dancing.
I have lived a good life, a moral life,
And I think I deserve some consideration.

I don't like this place, there are monsters
Out here, damn scavenging buzzards trying to tear
My insides out. I am so tired of fighting
For a doorway at night and the cold and the rain
Seeping through my bones, while you are pawing
Some girl, licking her. Yeah, I am somewhat familiar
With dice. Perhaps you'd like a game?

The Frog Prince

My eyes feel tired but I can't put the book
Down. The hero follows her stepping behind
A lamp post when she looks back vaguely disquieted.
Then he crosses the street and pretends to look
At a store window--the sun on the window

Like that day when it seemed to have fallen
Into the pond. I threw the ball accidentally
Into the water. You had to swim
To get it, your body almost green with algae.
You sprinkled water on me until I ran away,

And gave me the ball only if I promised
To eat with you, sleep with you.
The dog is sleeping next to me; he growls
Softly, probably dreaming of the frogs
He had chased in the back yard. The hero storms

Off because she is dancing with his rival,
And she cries on her friend's shoulder.
I pull my comforter up and the dog
Jumps on my bed and rests his head on my hips.
Sometimes, I want to crush you like the frog

Inside the dog's mouth, the back legs
Twitching. You were in a restaurant holding
Her hand, the other twined on a wine glass,
And looked at me remotely until I walked away
Down the steps, into the street.

To Daksa the Most Auspicious

Even the sun prostrates itself before you,
Bathing you in its heat until stars glint
On your obsidian skin. But you stare outward,
Impervious to downcast eyes pleading
At your feet, all days hungered for, furtively.

I spend nights listening for your footsteps
To caress the floor, hallow the lintel,
Praying you will pass me by. I have heard
That when you step off your pedestal
To walk this world, you light your lamp

From the embers of the cremation fires--light
From the husk, fire that you smear on yourself
Until you glisten like the sun.
And your fingers gently walk inside the body,
Like a pickpocket, to retrieve the small

Measure that you doled out at birth, as if time
Was an implacable friend you enjoy cultivating.
So you gather your harvest, and here you
Are at dawn letting the sun pay you homage.
The children play around you and fall down,

Getting up laughing. They have no conception,
Yet. My brown leathery skin trembles
Even when offering you this: It is the best
I could find--this lamb that I scrubbed
White, the bleating getting on my nerves

Until I slit the throat. Now it is still.
But the others, all they offer you are flowers
That wilt in the heat. I, too, would sneer,
But see how good the lamb looks with the blood
Washing your feet. Kneeling, I kiss them--

The blood on my lips blackens and dries slowly.
The sun is merciless and it is good to rest
In your shade. You feel smooth, warm,
But also cool, and I wish you will cover my hands
Gently, like a flower. I am coiled around

You, liquefying in your gaze until there
Are only black spots, hoping you will relent.
I have children to provide for. But you shimmer
Disdainfully, and my feet trudge
Through the heat-soaked dirt returning homeward.

To Siva with Love

The dogs are praying tonight,
Their throats raised to the heavens
As if God is turned on and off by prayer.
I have heard that at dusk you dance on black leaves
Propagating myths with piercing abandon:
A deep threnody unheard of in the stillness.

With your thunderbolt you destroy the world
And create it with the sound of your drum.
You are smeared with ashes
And your arms, adorned with shining armlets,
Are spread outward holding the world.
One foot raised to crush--

No, don't say to crush me.
I dreamt of you last night.
You called me "Beauty" and gave me flowers, white
And fragrant, asking me to share your amusement.
And you caressed my carefully dyed-hair.
It feels nice doesn't it?

I spent so much time washing it,
And drying it, and curling it,
And you said it felt like summer wheat on a summer's day.
Then your fingers brushed my neck feather-light...
But the dogs howled,
And the gibbous moon laughed with malice.

You stand before me as you have stood here for centuries,
Your third eye containing the darkness.
The trees rustle softly in the twilight
Begging you to dance with them,
And the moon smiles down to you artlessly.
The linga is erect on the pedestal.

Someone has placed white flowers around it;
They glisten, remotely.
You feel so cold, hard and unmoving,
And I need you intertwining me, teasing me to sleep.
I am so tired of walking the long cobblestones,
Turning and turning towards

My face, shadowed, lost in your third eye.
The dogs are lurking outside waiting for me,
But you don't care, you dance out there in the treetops
Scattering seeds downward.
Finally you, the lord of songs, sleep to create
New worlds, material without being real.

And I am left sitting in an empty room
Staring at closed shutters and whitewashed walls.
I long for my lament at nightfall to be a love song
Caressing my hair, quickening me...
My love, let me show you my sea shells--a prince
Gave them to me for releasing the spell he was under.

Back to Seed

It would be so nice to be part of the trees,
The flowers, the petals on the ground
Curling into themselves, back to seed.
It frightens me because I think about it a lot.
It's not normal is it, to have a death wish?
Once, I saw a man run over by a car.
He was by the side of the road, the blood
From his forehead, a thin strip to the dirty oil
Puddle. It glistened as if alive, blackish red
The way the earth gets sometimes.
His friend said that the pulse was very weak,
And the ambulance took a long time.
I felt it was me lying there--
In the night--stilled.
I could have taken another street and not seen
Ben holding her, kissing her.
And all I did was just stand there,
Staring, not sure what to do.
I read once how Lilith ran away from her husband
And they punished her
By making her kill her own children every night,
And eat them sitting in that formal dining room,
And the next day give birth.
I wish I knew how she did it--
The long black hair, a cloud, hiding her face.
I remember the walk back home--
The trees black, shadowed, and picking up
Acorn seeds, the dark brown shells protecting
The kernals--waiting for spring.
The headlights of a car, like the sun,
Defines me, then it veers off,

The driver cursing and the darkness slips
Back on containing me.
And what I had seen a few streets back
Recedes into the past as if coated
With the blood from the oil puddle--Ben's blood,
Dark red--it has become hard and balled,
Like a seed, waiting on the edge, like Lilith
In her dusk world when Adam marries again,
And I don't know for what.

Resting in Peace

This basement with its low ceiling,
No light feels like a coffin
With the lid closed tightly, then the slabs
Of concrete, finally the dirt,
The flowers, the marker announcing

To the world that I am liquefying underneath,
My brains pooling inside my skull.
Dust, as the church insists on reminding me
Whenever I decide to make an appearance,
Is a comfort. It takes us to the heavens,

Like the fire on the stove cooking the food,
Warming me and heating the kitchen,
The whole family congregating in it.
It is bad enough the seeds I plant
Show me their first leaves and then expire--

Drowned in dirt, drowned at dusk,
In water, my mother informs me--without them
Insisting death is the image of the lifegiver,
As if we are gods who go around waving
Skulls, and crooking a finger to still a breath

To wander, searching for a body, always
Looking back. I have decided to be cremated,
To be crushed and scattered, a mark
On every forehead, a missionary to blades
Of grass, the speck in my father's eye.

Cutting Water

I am going to cut this water with a knife--
With one stroke, like flesh--cleanly.
The water is blue-green and I can see my doll
Half buried in the sand; her eyes are closed
Though my brother kept mending them
So they would open and close. Her hair,

Long and black and straight, streams away
Gently swishing against the current--
Like weeds. I reach down but my arm is too short.
I take a deep breath and imagine the water
Inside my nose. If the water will part
The way the earth parted for Sita

When her husband spurned her, then I can take
My doll, named for Sita, and dry her
And lay her on my bed with her hands
Folded over her chest. My mother says,
She will buy me a new one with curly hair
Like mine, and sew her clothes--a nightdress

To sleep in. When the earth closed in,
Like water, Sita's husband couldn't find her.
"She is happy now," my mother said,
"She is with her goddess mother."
But she can't breathe, I know she can't,
The earth suffocating her like the coffee grounds

On my finger absorbing the blood when the knife
Slipped. When I wash it, I can see the flesh
Sliced neatly. But Sita didn't betray her husband;
The boat rocked too hard and I dropped the doll.
If I can reach down, down into the white sand
That drifts silently over the doll

When the oars churn the water...if I can hold
The stillness..."It's the way things are,"
My mother tells me. The water billows
The doll's red dress and the minnows sniff her,
Curious, one even goes under her dress
And comes out through the neckline.

PART 11

A SEQUENCE

For My Father

Siva's Boon

You collected her husband's soul
That afternoon in the forest
Riding on your white bull,
A cobra, hooded, coiled around your waist;
The way you came to collect my father's soul
When the afternoon sun burnished the trees.
I wanted to run after you, beg you

Not to take him away, I cried instead.
But she followed you, her footfalls soft
Over the fallen leaves and moss,
Thorns tearing her clothes, almost losing you
When the bull walked faster. You were impressed
By her fidelity and told her she could ask
For a boon but not for her husband,

While the cobra eyed her unblinkingly.
She asked for her father-in-law's eye-sight,
But still her footsteps echoed behind you.
When we were at the national forest
I waited for you under the trees,
Straining to hear your bull's slow footsteps,
To beg you to give me back my father.

Tired of her following you, you gave her
Another boon and she asked for a child
To keep away the loneliness. You gave her one
That afternoon, while the sun slowly brushed
The overhead leaves into gleaming silver,
Afterwards, her husband. In the picture
You were smiling, not looking fierce anymore.

I promised myself I, too, would follow you
Until you gave me back my father,
And he will smile with his mouth turning down
The way my sister's does. It became so dark
And cold, and the snake that slithered past
Scared me so much. They had to search for me,
And my mother scolded me for getting lost.

Cleaning the Fish Tank

The tank is slimy with algae,
Clogged with plants.
I prune them the way
They tried to cut the cancerous growth
Tearing your guts.
The flowers up in the tree close for the heat
To store their perfume til dusk.
They are white.
I empty the water, bowl after bowl,
By the wall that is half crumbling,
Telling myself that if I rush through
The living room you will be sitting there
Reading a medical journal.
My feet squish in the soft mud.
I pick the snails from the gravel
And dump the gravel in the grass.
Then I scrub the sides of the tank
With soap and scouring pad.
The leaves above are white-veined,
Dark green and serrated like the stitches
In your belly and you said, it didn't hurt.
The fish in the bowl swim distractedly.
My arms, covered with algae and soap, hurt.
At dusk you used to sit outside
And listen to the cicadas,
Never telling anyone how sick you were,
Storing it all up
The way fish hide eggs
In the gravel and I clumsily destroyed the nest.
I rinse the tank
Making sure there is no soap left.
Then I put back the gravel and the snails
And the plants, and finally the fish, carefully,
The way they lowered the casket in,
And my mother threw in the first handful of dirt.

White Flowers

We climb the tree by the wall
In the afternoon while our mother sleeps.
It is an imaginary tree house,

And I climbed the highest branch.
The flowers close for the heat
And the leaves when broken

Have a milky white fluid.
When we moved into the new house
We all gathered around the clay pot

To watch the milk boil over for good luck.
My parents were holding hands
Praying that my father's cancer

Would stay in remission. Then the pot burst,
Scattering milk and shards of clay,
Throwing everyone into separate

Corners of the room. My mother
Always said that's why he died
Because the milk did not boil over.

And I pluck the flowers and watch
The perfect drops of milk pool on the stem
And fall to the ground one by one.

In Loving Memory

This white glare is like a leaf burning,
Curling into itself, the veins creamy,
Definite, in the ash-leaf--grey as the dress
With the blue border you wore for a year.
It was a road ended, you said.
But I like the road before the cemetery,

The trees a green tunnel, cool and dark,
With the sounds of the cicadas.
At the gravesite, you make me kneel
On the rough cement border and pray for his soul,
The words a litany. You place the flowers,
Already wilted from the heat, carefully

In the embedded vase. The air is thickened
With water. My knees hurt, but I stay still
Watching you rake the weeds, pour
The water from the disused can we had carried
From the gate. The flowers flop down,
The stems too long for the vase. Your face

Is half turned away and I don't know
What to say--so I continue the stricture
And you finally join me. Our lips move silently
And the cicadas seem loud, their wing beats
Lost among each other. The tears run
Down your face and fall to the ground

As if they are drops of water cleansing him
Of his sins, keeping the fires from immolating
Him. I brush away the grit; my skin,
Pockmarked from the cement, feels raw.
We take a different route back and you hold
My hand. My shirt feels wet, almost cool.

For My Mother

Returning

I hug you, not letting you leave,
My back jammed on the door,
When you tell me it is time, and wake up
Afraid of going back to sleep--not sure
If I can handle your coming back every year
As if you are not under the rose bush

I planted on your grave.
You say you want to go boating, like we used to
Every year in April. I would beg you to stop
So I could pick the water lilies--
Great bunches of them that my mother later threw away.
They were light purple with yellow stamens

Bruising so quickly.
Then we went under the bridge disturbing
The nesting birds--my older brother always tried
To catch them, standing in the boat, the sparrows
Like flies around our ears.
Once a baby sparrow fell into the water,

We almost lost an oar trying to rescue it,
And my brother wiped it with his handkerchief,
Then with yours and let it go.
But you didn't when that exotic bird
With red and yellow feathers flew in through the window.
You put it in a cage with the love birds

Because, you said, it came all the way from India.
It refused food, even the safflower seeds
We had spent a whole afternoon searching for,
And died a few days later. You had it stuffed.
I can still see it now on that perch
Next to the stereo as if you had to follow it,

The way I am trying to follow you,
Searching for the breadcrumbs,
Hunting for them under rocks and hedges,
While the birds wheel in the sky, raucous
Against the trees--leaves brushed blue by the sun,
Like the water lilies, sometimes so thick

You couldn't navigate, the boat turning and turning,
The oars crushing the flowers.
And I am left waiting in this ritual of ours
For next year--the way dead leaves wait
By the doorway for a gust of wind,
For the door to be opened.

Echoes Behind Me

I can hardly hear you now, you seem distant,
Behind a wall--thick black stone that won't let
Sound penetrate like that big rock-like
Mountain we visited one afternoon. The passages
Echoed behind us as if the prince was still
Guarding his house and watching us look
At the pictures he had painted of women

Gathering flowers, their arms extended, offering
Them to him. I wanted to touch them
But you stopped me telling me instead
How he walled his father, securing the stone,
Plastering the cement, then lived above the crypt.
He spent his afternoons, the guide said,
By the ornamental pool--the fish of such colors,

They put the rainbow to shame. I can imagine
Him even now watching the fish circle
The water lilies, then the sudden dart to catch
The insect, the mosquito larvae--the water
Cold even with the sun and the wind
Creating ripples. The sides are cracked now,
And rainwater has collected in it.

You threw a penny, the bright copper settling
In the silt, and slowly disappearing
Under the half-rotten leaves, the way sometimes
When I hear my name called, I turn around
But it is only an echo wrapping me in memories.
And I am searching for you again,
Like I did in the woods, not finding you

As if you had laid yourself down among the trees
And become one of them, thick brown trunks
That contain you like a barrow. My calling
Bounces off the trees and echoes among the branches
As if you are hidden within myself. And I see
Myself becoming you, the same walk, the staring
Into space and the quietness like silence.

Underneath the Wooden Scales

The skull on the wheel is cracked and about to fall.
 I trace the sheafs of grain on the scales
 With my fingers. I remember when my sister
 And I watched the men cut them, the spokes blurred
 Against the sun. She found the nest
 With the skeleton of a baby bird, the skin

Stretched over it, and the beak open
 As if still expecting its parents. She believed
 She had killed it by finding it like the birds
 In the rosebush that were covered by ants
 A few days later, alive, the eyes shrivelling
 In the noon heat like the cut stalks of grain.

Now the eyeholes of the skull contract
 This light and the dust in the field rises
 Behind us. My sister was cradling the bird,
 Searching for a place to bury it, and the men
 Yelled at us to get away from there. When I look
 Closely, I see that the painting is actually

A mosaic, and that the wheel can never turn
 The way memories are stilled in the mind.
 My sister's head is down, she is leaning
 On the bed with my brother praying for my father's
 Soul. Her hands are pressed together
 And I think how the lines on each palm match

The other perfectly the way the scales
Hold the grain, golden, and the skull in the center
Cannot see it. She cried on the way home,
Worried the bird will not go to heaven,
And finally slept on my father's lap. He stroked
Her sweat-soaked hair gently, the veins

On his hands ridged and blue as the rosary
Twined on them during the funeral, the beads,
Mosaic, and barely held together. And my sister
Cries years later finding the picture of him
And her holding the bird as if memory, stored
Like grain, turns the wheel tumbling the skull.

Furrows

You don't look up when that young boy makes
His choice as if you had known it all along.
Your fingers furrow the earth making a path, long
And winding, that disappears into the darkness.
In the firelight, the veins seem to sustain
Your hand. You tell me, he chose the clay pot

And not the arrow because he felt himself
To be a female. Breaking the pot, he uses
A shard to scratch himself between his thighs
Until blood runs down his legs, and throws the shard
Into the fire. I did not tell my mother
Of the blood on the sheets, like a dull penny,

Afraid the bleeding will not stop until I am dead.
The women bring him back dressed in a golden skirt,
The shoulder-length hair bound with flowers.
Once, I showed you the flowers I had stuck
In my hair and you pinned a fallen daisy.
"Like a bride," you said. "May I have this dance?"

You use the discarded arrow to make the grooves
Deeper as if you don't want me to follow you.
"This path can be walked only once," you say,
But your fingers trace the arrow, curving
And doubling back, until I cover them with mine
And they slip away. The young girl's head

Is modestly down when the women hold the white
Cloth she had used to wipe herself with.
If I cast a shard of clay with my blood on it
Into the fire, then sand it until the warmth
Is only a memory and offer it to you, will you
Teach me to waltz like the last time in my bare

Feet while the dog slept under the table?
"This path is not for you," you say,
As if you had watched your grave being dug,
Hiding in the shadows while the men joked among
Themselves. Then you walked over to make
A comment, to make sure the walls were smooth, even.

A Broken Wall

A new house must have a new wall, they said,
Not a broken-down wall, so ugly, and such bad luck.
Walls keep out the devil, but it was already
Inside in the hallway--hair carved and dusted
With ashes and red eyes that seemed to follow me
And find me even when I hid. It captures

The evil eye, my mother said, absorbs all
The bad luck the way darkness absorbs light.
The candle flickered inside the New Year's lantern
We hung on the tree--my older brother made it
Cutting the bamboo into strips and bending
Them into shape. He chased my sister and me away,

But you made him let us help and my finger kept
Getting caught in the string. The lantern
Swayed so hard and you said, it won't go out
Because it is the new year and the paper will protect
The flame--the light like dusk in our faces.
When my brother tried to take it down

With the broom to relight it, the lantern snagged
In a branch and ripped the blue and white tissue paper
Like the wall that someone's car had rammed into.
And you said, there is next year and we'll make
A bigger one in the shape of a star.
My brother's voice fell the way a candle,

Gutted, falters in the wick. "I closed his eyes
With two coins," he said as if his voice
Had caught you leaving and couldn't make you
Stay--the scarred body crumbling like the wall
With weeds growing between the bricks.
The words reordered still fall into him

And become a litany within me so that seeing
Is my own voice returning the way the devil never
Forgets, the eyes never blinking, sees my brother
In the hard sunshine after the coffin is lowered,
The long angular body, etched, dismissing
His friend's "I'm sorry" just as awkwardly.

Three Matches

I have heard that if I strike a match like this
The sudden flaring in the dark
Will blind you--a hand on your face, the head
Haloed in the light. It would be as if the sun
Caught you in an act of carelessness,
A shaft striking you down. And if I make

A wish that the empty shell with the legs
Clinging tightly to the underside of the leaf
Wouldn't be too big or too small but perfect
So that I could slide gently into the slit
Between the eyes and abdomen then it wouldn't be
A rehearsal like the time the dog died

And we buried him under the pear tree.
The fleas jumped off the long golden fur;
Because the body is cold, you said, they can't drink
The blood anymore. My mother had to wave away
The flies that tried to settle on your head.
We place white jasmine on the mound, sticking

Them into the earth--the flowers like the night
Sky. When my younger brother and sister
Broke all the flowers from the vine, I wanted
To stop them because I had planted it. You said:
Nothing is wasted, it all comes back
As if the roots were cradling the bones.

The darkness almost complete, you try to scuttle
 Under the rock--the lichen is slippery
 But I manage to grab you, my arms around
 Your neck and strike the second match.
 Your clear brown eyes are almost black and I see
 Me in them running to meet you, my school bag

Thumping on my side, down the long drive-way
 The moment you are at the gate.
 Afterwards, we go grocery shopping. You walk
 So fast that I can't keep up but you make
 Sure I do by holding my hand. It's hard
 For me not walk on the lines

Of the squares. I know what will happen
 If I do. The fishmonger offers you
 The fish eggs. He slits the fish from the belly
 To the tail and gently pulls it out. I use
 The last match to light the candle in the small
 Red jar in front of the mother and child.

I am coiled tightly around you--the tunnel
 Is pitch black and fits only you, you say.
 At two, I fitted perfectly in the crook
 Of your arm. You are looking up at me, smiling,
 Your head, even then bald, shining in the light.
 I am trying to catch a butterfly bouncing

On your arm. Caught, it flutters in my cupped
Hands until you make me let it go
And it rests on the lemon tree. The small
Black balls sticking to the underside
Of the leaves, you tell me, are butterfly eggs.
But the fruit is bitter.

I roll the rock back, making sure it covers
The tunnel completely so that light
Will not reach it. The Madonna is looking down
At me, her eyes kind, as if she would give me
What she has, with dark brown eyes
And a mouth that turns down when smiling.