

~ First Place NMW 24 Nonfiction Prize (tie) ~

**Britton Gildersleeve**

*Anomie*

*‘The limits of my language are the limits of my world.’*

~ Wittgenstein

*Places speak their own languages. Cities, neighborhoods, even the individual rooms of houses each have their own private language. There is a rise and fall like the tonal musics of Vietnamese and Thai—six ways of meaning.*

In the rooms I wandered as a child, the bars on the windows whispered to me of Ali Baba’s forty thieves, stealing through the dark into the villa. They sang songs of Hanuman, monkey warrior, flying through the night. And other times they were simply bars: In the still heat of the afternoon, when the house was napping, I would slip between them to sit on the tiled roof, trying to translate what it knew.

You can come to identify with the language, the fragrance, the textures of a place so strongly that they become a part of you. The French call it *goût de terroir*, the taste of the landscape: soil and rain and rock inflect taste—the perfume of grapes, the crumb of cheese. We taste this in wine, in tea, in chocolate. Outside of Naples, the San Marzano tomato blends the volcanic minerals of Vesuvius into the tart flesh of the ultimate pizza tomato, and wine labels bear their birth certificates proudly, the seal of aristocratic geography. Each of us becomes what we depend on for sustenance, tied to the places where we grew. Even if we can never call those places home.

My earliest beginnings were in grief, although I was a child of privilege, loved and cared for. The child of two matriarchies, I did not see my father—away at war—until I was almost two years old. In my grandmother’s scrapbook of our lives, next to the picture of my father’s return from that war—doll clutched in one large hand, daughter in the other—is a yellowed clipping of a very different father: the man who shot a woman to save his own men, killed a young woman—perhaps a mother—quickly, efficiently.

“He had to, you know,” my grandmother would assure me, as she fingered the yellow clipping, dated so close to my birth day. So that from the very beginning, I knew there was war.

My father came back from it.

My husband changed in it.

I grew up shadowed by its ghosts.

Like I grew up with my mother, my grandmothers, my great-aunts and aunts, the company of women marking me in ways I can’t always name. In the house my father bought for my grandmother, my mother and me, women cooked and laughed and cried and told stories over tea and coffee and long nights of waiting. In those hot Oklahoma nights, barely cooled by the damp dirt-fragrant mist of the old water cooler, we sat together in the living room.

“Claude never did go out with that woman again,” my grandmother would tell, her gray eyes almost blue with laughter.

“I should have known about Earl then,” my Aunt Ina would mourn, shaking her head.

And when Uncle Clete died, we folded Aunt Bonnie into us, into our house, absorbed her grief and held her as she cried. “He’s too young,” she said over and over. “What will I do?”

Carol, my mother’s youngest sister who still lived at home, curled my ponytail, made up my face with lipstick and Grandma’s powder rouge, and walked me three blocks down Birmingham and one block over to Bob’s Grocery, where I would watch Mr. Grady slice slices from a block of frozen chili. He would wrap them in white paper on the glass counter, and hand them over into my keeping. This was a language I learned early: the precision of a sharp knife making dinner, the transfer of food from one hand to another. With food we were safe—it was a kind of love anyone could offer, love no one ever refused.

I learned to cook first from Aunt Bonnie, later from my mother-in-law. Like most of us, I picked up a few things from all over, but in our family “all over” meant from the old ladies.

“The aunts,” my husband Glen still calls them, long-dead and their blue and silver hair vivid only in my memories: Grandma, Aunt Bonnie, and Aunt Ina. Sometimes Aunt Velma and Aunt Erma, sometimes Aunt Gussie or Aunt Anna.

But mostly Aunt Bonnie. I never learned anything about cooking from Aunt Ina, just cleaning. She was very clean, even when she began to think that the man down the street was demon-possessed, and that a clean garage was a passport into heaven. I don’t remember anything about her cooking. If cooking is really about life and love, like M.F.K. Fisher says, then maybe that’s why. Aunt Ina wasn’t very happy, even then. But Aunt Bonnie, Grandma, Aunt Velma, Grandmother... all my other old ladies cooked the way they loved me, with generous abandon. I learned the most *real* cooking from Aunt Bonnie. As far back as I can remember, she was cooking. Green beans cooked ‘til tender with salt pork and pearly new potatoes; creamed turnips soft and slightly sweet in a blanket of buttery white sauce. Apricot fried pies, the apricots fresh-picked from the backyard apricot tree that was part of my birth, the crust hot and melting around the gooey sweet filling. I would burn my mouth every time because I just couldn’t wait to taste.

“Honey, just wait a bit, and it’ll be cool,” Aunt Bonnie would shush me. But I could never wait, and I would toss the hot half-moon pie from hand to hand, nibbling little bites from the fork-crimped edges.

Aunt Bonnie made cobblers too, rhubarb and peach and sometimes blackberry. The tart fruit feeling sandwiched between the sugar-crackled crust, the layers brightly colored and redolent of butter and sugar and the summer’s harvest. When I was nine, and had to have my leg operated on, the doctor asked me to think of my favorite things as I lay waiting for the anesthesia to take effect. I began to list them, mumbling from under the mask: Aunt Bonnie’s chicken and rice, and skillet cornbread melting with butter, and sweet Porter peach cobbler to finish it all off. I swear that doctor looked hungry as I lay under the mask looking up at him. And that’s what I dreamed of, Aunt Bonnie’s Saturday meal.

Chicken and rice wasn’t good enough for Sunday dinner. Sunday dinner had to be roast, or pork chops, or fried chicken, which Grandma always made. Aunt Bonnie did the “everyday” cooking, but Grandma made the “special” fried chicken—crust shattering in your mouth into a hundred flakes of brown. Grandma and Aunt Bonnie lived together, had ever since Uncle Clete died when I was four, when Aunt Bonnie came over in tears. She and Grandma, already widowed, clinging to each other while I peeked around the door into the big bedroom. They had a double wedding and now a double widow-hood, they said.

We all thought of it as Grandma’s house, but my father bought it. He set it up for Grandma before I was even born. After Uncle Clete died, Aunt Bonnie came to sleep in the front bedroom, the only real bedroom the tiny house had. Grandma slept on the back porch, which Uncle Charlie

turned into a sleeping porch, surrounded on three sides by large windows that opened onto the backyard garden. He replaced the rusty old screens with roller windows, clear glass swinging out into the back garden, the bedroom light changing with the Oklahoma weather.

In the summer, if you lay quiet between the cotton sheets still scratchy from hanging on the clothesline, fragrant with summer sun and the peonies that bloomed where the sheets brushed them as they almost touched the ground, you could hear crickets and the sound of June bugs hitting the screened windows. If you were unlucky enough to sleep during the day—consigned by behavior or illness to an afternoon nap—you lay on the smooth sheets, under the breeze from the big fan at the end of the room. It swept across you, moving the air from the kitchen, with its smells of hot fried chicken and cobbler, to the garden, with its own smells of roses and hot grass and water from the sprinkler falling against the dusty walls of the old shed.

It was a Southern kind of house, deep eaves and tall windows and the screened-in back sleeping porch. On the front porch there was a dusty red glider; you sat on its metal lattice work until there were deep imprints on the back of your sweaty thighs. There was a cooler in the dining room that cooled by spraying a mist of air that came through musty, mildewed vents. Summer in Grandma's and Aunt Bonnie's house meant hard scratchy grass in the back yard, and coming in through the back storm door into the dining room, where you stood in front of the cooler until you traded your hot sweaty red cheeks for the cooler's fine mist.

We were, I realize now, a Southern kind of family, although I didn't think so then. I suppose, when and if I thought of it at all, I saw us as just like everyone else. Children mirror the idiosyncracies of their families, legitimating difference, eccentricity, even craziness, through their acceptance. We were Southern crazy. Not the inbred crazy of my friend Tracy's West Virginia backwoods family, but the nothing-I-do-could-be-wrong crazy of my Grandmother Britton's Kentucky "landed gentry." If her son, my father, thought that we should have a playhouse, then he saw nothing wrong with buying a small open horse-trailer and roofing it with canvas for me to use in the driveway. If my grandmother, a *grande dame* of the first order, thought we should have posture and ballet lessons, then by God we would get them, even when my father was trying to feed three children and a wife on a light colonel's half-pay retirement. That's just what you did.

When I was little, and just starting to learn about the feeding of a large family like ours, I was only allowed to watch the aunts clean up. Once I was one of the "big girls," I could help bring the dishes from the carved dining table to the old-fashioned sink in the kitchen. You could bathe a four-year-old child in that sink, and we sometimes did. It held an enormous roaster with ease—the aftermath of an extended family's holiday feasting—neatly napped with lemony detergent suds. After one aunt had emptied a dish and put the carefully wrapped leftovers into the icebox, another washed the dish clean in the soapy sink, handing it off to a third to dry. There were always plenty of aunts.

I knew I had officially passed from little girl to big girl the day I was offered the copper-bottomed pots to polish. Kitchen jewelry! I took out the white and copper-lidded jar of Twinkle, and carefully restored each scorched and burned surface to pristine gleam. Years later, in a kitchen half a world away—a slum in Alger—I would stand once again on a stool polishing copper-bottomed pans. Outside the window of that life, instead of Oklahoma rain and sunlight, was the ventilator shaft of a third-floor walk-up, and my neighbor Saliha with ten children chattering to me in French. It felt surprisingly familiar.

There are so many ways of speaking. My grandmother's small house, for years the only home I believed in, held within its rooms the ghostly sound of apricot blossoms drifting onto pale grass in spring. My grandmother planted that apricot tree the day I was born. The earth shook, the only earthquake recorded in the town where I was born. While my father, halfway around the world, took a nameless young woman's life in payment for men whose names he held like ransom for his unnamed daughter, the earth rumbled thunder and tectonics. Yet another lifetime

and half a world away, Saliha, across the ventilator shaft affianced to her husband, she 14, he 30. Each of us connected by the thinnest of threads....

\*

Between women there is always the language of biology. The down-drift of blood, the double syllable of heartbeat. A friend once told me that naming this “shared” is essentialist, rejects plurality. *No*. While it is true that the woman who bared her breasts to me in a dark hall in Hussein Dey, Algiers, begging for money to feed her nursling, bleeds to the same moon that I do, this does not make us “sisters.” Nor does either of us have a clue what the other is thinking. It means only that when women traveling a hundred different roads gather, our bodies link us in our fragility, our dependency, our resilience. Immeasurably closer than childhood friends is Saliha, the Kabylie woman across the ventilator shaft, joined to me by conversations over polished copper, shared cups of sweet mint tea, lives exchanged like talismans against the dark spaces between men and women.

I can’t pretend—I wouldn’t want to—that I know what the woman who died that day so many years ago at my father’s hands felt. I don’t know her age, her name; her face is blank to me. She is only a family story, the mark she left upon a man and the women who knew him. Like a woman I never met in Saudi Arabia, who cooked for me and kept the house where I was a guest. *Yousef’s sister*.

Yousef’s sister had no name, even when I asked Yousef, whose own name was familiar to me, my husband, our sons. His sister, who fed us lamb and rice and dates, sharp with cinnamon and cumin and oranges.... I will never know her name. But I know that I am no more like her on any fundamental level than I am like the sea that whispers through my blood. And yet sometimes, years after I last ate dates stuffed by her hands, sat at plates polished by her hands, I wonder about her face and name, and listen for her stories.

“I will not sell my sister into marriage,” Yousef would tell my husband (never talking directly to me, another woman whose name he did not say aloud). “Not as my mother’s father did to her,” he would add. Yousef a good man, driven by good intentions—a woman not chattel, he was trying to tell my husband, tongue-tied by culture and language and the narrow corridors of male communication.

So that Yousef’s sister was a ghost in her own house, nameless and faceless and outside of a world where the only language that could gain her entrance was the language spoken by a mother, by a wife. The languages of the women of my family, whose eyes opened like windows into rooms I never knew until I married. Their stories changed like my own body after birth, after the week it took us to name our firstborn son. But bodies are not language—they can only frame it, try to translate it, place breath and sound into one package and mail it to another.

\*

As an eight-year-old child whose hair hung behind her like the tail of a Palomino pony, I knew that my body was alien to everything around me. Standing in the marketplace of a lost city shaped in equal measure by war and elegance, the reaching hands of dark-haired women told me that my hair was different, my skin different, the shape and taste of unfamiliar language on my tongue... different. Standing in the *grand marché* of Saigon, recognizing the utter singularity of my body, I first began to see how we live at the nexus of place, body, gender. All of these the soil in which language grows.

My mother, still running from the two-dress poverty of her childhood, told me proudly that we were diplomats; my friends called us expat brats. I only knew we didn’t fit—Vietnam cut too

large and tropical for us, we who looked so much like French colonials, so little like the women I loved and wanted to be. Slender graceful women with black hair like a pour of dark water down willow backs, pedaling bicycles down a tree-lined street, as rare and lovely as orchids. As unlike my aunts as I would be.

I sought some key that would tell me who I was, and where that girl belonged. From the onset of memory, I seemed to recognize that home is tangled with body, with the physical and material, but also with self. With belonging. That blonde child, who stood behind the iron gates of privilege while a girl unbearably close to her own age offered up an infant swollen with hunger, knew early on that love is not enough. All you have to carry with you in our migration from birth to death is your body. Growing up at the mercy of wars, of evacuations, aware even at age eight which of my belongings I could fit within one suitcase, I grew to depend on my body. This I could take with me. This I could, hopefully, get out of a war zone. This is all we really own, all I can offer the gods who are so often beyond logic. We are no more than turtles.

That market, with the lepers standing sentry at the entry, where the lacquer fish swim swim on the plaques and albums in the last corridor of the last alley, is still my home. Even now, as my two sons ready for their own families, leave this home we've made so far from there and then, I dream in the polyphonic music of a language never familiar. Although when I sit by the counter of a favorite restaurant, I am once again a child, surrounded by the fragrance of jasmine rice and *nuóc mắm*... I can almost understand the cook's banter. Something in the rise and fall of her diphthongs, her nuanced *bá, bâ, bà*... This is the language of my childhood, as familiar as the soft Southern vowels of great-aunts and plain aunts and almost aunts and sisters.

\*

And even if I wanted to disavow these former lives, I couldn't. We are what we have known, where we have been, what we have spoken, eaten, touched and loved. Our knowledge of each language's syntaxes, structures and contextual meanings becomes increasingly unfamiliar as we venture further into territories of translated meanings and cultures, like a shore at high tide is hidden by incoming waters. The country of translation—like that swallowed shore—is a liminal space between two seemingly familiar places, meeting in strange and disturbing blendings. Words shift in meaning like sand underfoot, and meaning is no more containable than water seeping through cupped hands. To speak another language well is to think in that language, to be shaped and colored by a world-view that provides a skeletal framework for meaning. Ironically, the deeper the understanding of the language and culture, sometimes the more difficult the translation. I can translate the Thai *wai* as a bow with hands pressed flat together, held before the chest. Infinitely more difficult to translate the degrees of social recognition implicit in its nuances: how high the hands, how deep the bow. And yet the body schooled in such actions remembers with a kind of muscle memory the precise intonation of the hands' position.

And what does any of this—a circle that twines around my body, only to end up where it began—have to do with lyric and travel and hunger and home, with words that trace the heart's migrations as often as the body's? Nothing. Everything. Women are, Hélène Cixous tell us, always writing with their bodies. And to do so in a world dominated by logic and power and men and Western dualism is to speak—to write—in translation.

Growing up speaking two languages, I knew that ink was my true language. It seems elementary: writing is translation. To interpret one human's longing for another is to translate the language of one body, one being, into a language that unites two separate and disparate experiences. Writing is always to speak for those who do not/cannot speak for themselves, as Adrienne Rich argues eloquently, working against an "apartheid of the imagination."

I translate places: the fragrance of cinnamon that once haunted every Algerian bakery, infusing bread and flour, blending the savory with the sweet; the thin, clear light that is desert

twilight on a Saudi *djebel*; the attenuated twilight that stretches impossibly thin in the summer night over Amsterdam. These places color who I am today, frame with exotic details my ordinary life. To try to capture in the net of words how sand becomes your breath during a *shamal*, how you turn your back to it and step slowly backward, leaning into the wind's wall, wrapping your baby tight within the safety of your shirt, like a hundred hundred Saudi women are doing at the same moment... How can words carry meaning outside the boundaries of our separate individual experiences? What woman who has climbed down a slippery metal hand ladder into an Oklahoma storm cellar, to escape a tornado's fury, sees in the yellow ozone sky the violent anger of sand and wind?

How can words lay themselves like a bridge between the unfamiliar and experiences that resonate with recognition? How can a trip to the market in Alger evoke the labyrinth of Bangkok's markets, or the *suks* of Dammam, when the spices differ in fragrance, and the sing-song palaver of merchants curls around three or four or even five languages? But a farmer's market in Oklahoma is still a market, selling fragrant Stillwell strawberries instead of bristling *rambutan*. To make that connection between earth, its worker, the fruit of a real person's hands, and the basket I will eat from later that afternoon, is to stand on a dirt floor of words, in any market around the world: the one in Bangkok, where I buy purple-red *mangosteen*; the one in Dammam, where I juggle pistachios hot off the brazier; the one in Puerto Vallarta, where I take home limes for the evening's salsa. The exchange of worn bills and unfamiliar coins—piastres or dinars or pesos or dollars—is less about money than it is about connection. Unlike a supermarket, with its aisles of generic cereals and cookies, a market's brands are the tomatoes of the man from down Route 66 who raises heirlooms, and cajoles me into tasting one, to "get beyond its butt-ugliness." A market is not about convenience: human connection is too messy to be convenient. And the translation implicit in the words we choose to paint the fragrance of peaches and the odor of meat, death in the naked rabbit hanging from its crossed and tied feet, and birth in the double-yoked eggs still lightly smeared with mother's blood, the delicate chartreuse leaf and vivid scarlet fruit... No one needs a dictionary for these. In the specificity of words that we do not recognize is the common weekly journey of women across the world: buying food, making meals, creating home from shelter.

It is the way my mother held me, fed me, wiped my face as I sobbed from Tulsa to San Francisco, a long flight away from my grandmother, who would surely die in my absence. *I close my eyes and all the world falls dead...* Away from home. With boxes of Kraft dinner and tins of applesauce my mother tried to recreate familiarity, the job of mothers long before boxes and cans. In our rooms she hung curtains and tailored bedspreads, wrapping us in pink-and-white safety. It is how, on hot days out of school, she would take me with her to the *Cercle Sportif*, where I would lay on the sticky blue mats spread over the Sports Club's polished wood floor, and lift my legs, half the length of hers, into the air. Bicycling, bicycling. Where were we trying to go?

\*

In Islam, the journey to Makkah is called *hadj*—it is the journey every true believer must make at least once in a lifetime, wrapping the body in white and traveling west or east, as if movement might propel one into faith. But while the pilgrim on *hadj* always heads towards Makkah, to end her journey kneeling in front of the black stone of the Ka'aba, merit still accrues to the *hadji* who sets out on the journey, even though she does not make it all the way home. In the history of Islam, many pilgrims die on the road, never attaining the Arabian Peninsula. What they leave to mark their passages are words, maps for other pilgrims who follow.

Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s was as much an intellectual desert as it was a lunar landscape of craters and silt. A woman could wander her own *Rhub al'Khali*—her own Empty Quarter—for years, lost. If you count the millions that the Saudis spent on greenification, your private deserts

were more barren. In the eight years I lived there, the Saudis made their deserts bloom, at least in the places where they had planted windbreaks, watered them from tanker trunks, nurtured and tended acacia, bottle brush and cacti, so that satellite photos taken 10 years apart show different horticultural topography. No one mapped or tended our withered dreams, our desperate isolations.

In the smallest of towns—the company compound—I traded my mother’s china for acceptance. Like Isak Dinesen, I unpacked the trappings of privilege, and for my sons’ sakes, worked to fit in. This I learned from my own mother—I should have been better at it. But it led me to the edge of silent, noteless suicide. I reached out for words, starving for someone who could put a name to the *anomie* I carried within. Someone who could translate my single terror into community.

Cixous, familiar with being the woman, the foreigner, with living in the labyrinthine cities of North Africa, drew for me a map that made sense of what I had been trying to locate in that wasteland. She recognized the danger attendant upon writing as a woman, that language is inadequate, and yet it’s all we have. And she tied that knowledge of inadequacy back to the word’s divorce from the body, the fissuring of experience into what we can communicate through language, and that which eludes our linguistic attempts. “The Voice,” she told me, “sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one’s breath away...” Taking one’s breath away: the breath that shapes the image into words... experience and myth and icon carried on our living breath. I listened, and after years of silence, I began to write. Within three months I was on a plane home, suicide receding like the white nightmare of the desert.

\*

In Vietnam and Thailand I learned to believe that time is not only *not* linear, it is not even circular. Instead, think of time as spherical, moving out from a center point that is the consciousness of the thinker, although all of us are webbed together. But if you view time in that manner, what you see is time coextant: you can reach out to change yesterday as easily as tomorrow. And perhaps the woman I once was knows now that she will find friends. Will find words. The words of no place, Bella Brodzki argues: “to speak and write from the space marked self-referential is to inhabit... no place.” This is where I found language, in *anomie*. In the place that has no name, no passport, no laws. A place without customs of the country. Like so many other displaced persons, I am always trying to write myself home. Even inner life is a migration: the following of the breath.

\*

Buddhism—particularly Zen—says that in the essentials, in the stripped-down bones of the real and the abstract, we find meaning. A Tibetan Buddhist skull cup—once made from the skull of a dead monk—is not simply a reminder that life is transient, but is also a material memory of the dead. The cup is functional, a quality as important in the real as memory is in the abstract, and the cup melds these elements in the bones of being. So the brushstroke of the incomplete circle that stands for enlightenment not only signifies a real state for the Buddhist, but art for the sake of beauty.

With this frame in place, breath becomes the icon of the contemplative space Zen offers in counterpoint to every day’s experience. Paradoxically, it also marks life’s irreducible necessity: air in, air out. It is in this paradox, in Zen’s slippery language of illogic and intuitive leap, that poetry thrives. Trinh Minh-ha once said that the language of Zen was never meant to lead to vicarious “knowledge,” but rather to experiential “wisdom.” Its intent is to replicate—as far as possible—the experience of the writer/speaker/knower. To make accessible that crescent that lies outside the group’s language and experience. To translate, into language, experience. Since I was a small child trying to paint with inadequate words the vivid colors and fragrances of the places

that passed for home, I swam in translation. Biting into vowels and consonants, tasting diphthongs on my tongue, trying to find a way to translate difference—my own and that of the places I called home.

I try to draw the high iron gates of the villa on Phan Đình Phùng. I invoke the names of women who combed my hair, women who fed me, sheltered and protected me with their own bodies, curled themselves around my grief and laid their laughter down to make for me safe passage. Brought me pumpkin bread when food was poison. Made me tea when ritual was all that held me tethered to my life. Remembering, I fall into safety.

\*

Tess Gallagher said when she was asked to write about the influences on her as a writer that she knew “I would want to get back to the child in me.” The child in me lives so far away, in a world so different than the one she grew up to inhabit, that it is difficult for the two of us to talk. But for women, Gallagher reminds us, words are “slow in coming” anyway. They are filtered through the language(s) of our bodies, our bodies that end up abandoned... aging... alone. The downside of growing up in war zones is that so few of us survive. When many of the aging hippies of my generation protested against the Gulf wars, the “faceless Muslim masses” for me had—still have—faces: my neighbor Saliha, affianced at 14, married at 15, mother to 10 living children. Our house help Chandra, plant supervisor with a master’s degree who took a job abroad as a house “boy” to support his family, to make a “living” wage. The women who surrounded me in markets in Alger, in Cairo, in Dammam, protected me from street boys w/ their own small white-shrouded bodies, placing themselves around me like a wall. Saudi Arabia is the vegetable vendor in Dhahran, the brass merchant in Khobar. All wars erase faces etched in someone’s memory. All wars orphan us from memory.

\*

Buddhists find the entire concept of self a kind of fiction, anyway. By ten, I was familiar with *maya*—illusion. I remember wondering if I would disappear overnight, just a dream in someone’s fitful sleep. At 12 the Zen *koan* “Am I a man (never a woman, not even then and there) dreaming I am a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he is a man?” already troubled me: I was never certain. Mostly I remember wondering who I was, what it meant to question my own existence, my sense of exile. This was not something we discussed in my family. Not with my parents, nor my beloved blue-haired ladies: my great-aunts, my grandmothers, my not-quite-godmothers. Each of them seemed firmly attached to the ground on which they walked, rooted in the soil they tended in the garden behind the tiny green-roofed house on Birmingham. I floated above them, like a kite held only by a thin, frayed ribbon. I remember trying to translate my recognition of this sense of non-being into words. Even for nascent Buddhists, the self is a permeable membrane. I knew early on that who I am is inextricably woven into the fabric of the women who raised me, the father who left me, the children who would come after. Even the slippery jewel-toned lizards that crept through the cool tile bathrooms of my childhood were part of me, helping shape and define in some indefinable manner the sound of my name.

Always, the webbedness of the world, the voices of all of us, a kind of Southeast Asian rhythm, the lilting cadence of the Thai culture—supposedly alien, made different by my blonde Midwestern birth—that I have begun, finally, two lifetimes later, to internalize. It is the rhythm of a Buddhist world view—the morning passage of monks, whose mendicant journeys tie dharma to karma for all of us; the drowsy heat of afternoon naps, flies gently waved away from sweaty sleep, never swatted into death; the evening sunset reflected off of the gold spire-like *chedi* of a

nearby temple—the easy contemplative nature of life in Thailand that stayed with me, dormant, for the 30 years it has taken me to write my way home.

In Buddhism what you believe influences your practice, a lovely word for what it is that offers meaning to the spaces of our days. A word that tells me I don't have to "get it right," that maybe even the universe doesn't worry about whether I'm "right." That "getting it wrong" is often what words do best anyway, allowing us quite literally to change our minds. Maybe being right isn't even what it's all about. What you practice is your path through this world into the next: it is your path to awakening, to rousing from the deep sleep that passes for attention, and seeing what connects each of us one to another. What we have is the air we breathe in, the air we breathe out. The air held within the chests of each breathing life, as far back as breath crawled from water, walked on land. The air inhaled by each pair of lungs and gills and each cellular organism since time began remains, inflected by the breather, the swimmer, the blindly swimming uninucleate cell...Within the alveoli is the breath of prehistoric fern, the fragrance of cultivated rose, the essence of warrior and mother and hero and child. This is the air that shapes the spaces between the words I practice daily, sometimes for hours, hoping they have the power to save me. Words are my breadcrumb path home. Each phoneme is a marker on the way to who I am, where I belong.

Home. In the breath: the breath that governs the line break is the breath of the symbolic. This is the breath that when followed will lead us home. It is for words to translate our extraordinary ordinary lives—however ephemeral, however like the skull cup—into a form that honors both their terrible beauty and their brutal integrity. It is for words to map this pilgrimage through the imaginary, to provide safe passage for all of us through the shadows of each other's chambered hearts and fragile, temporal bones. Home, to the breath that connects each of us one to another, breath inhaled and exhaled by fire and ash and water and fern and the first blind crawler from the sea. Home to the hearth-stone of memory and desire.