
January 2000

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Recommended Citation

Balestrieri, Elizabeth Brownell (2000). Poems. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 1(1), 41-44.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol1/iss1/4>

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Poetry

By Elizabeth Brownell Balestrieri

FOR MY SISTERS

"To educate your daughters is the same as watering someone else's garden."
- Chinese proverb

Two of us read the wallpaper at night
on Beaconsfield Street where our flat
sat between the Germans and the Irish,
where overhead Greeks walked in anger.
Mr. Nanos coming home late and Mrs. Nanos
throwing whatever was ready-to-hand –
Mother Goose figures quivered on walls
as curses poured through a ceiling
as thin as our nightgowns. Our third sister
safe from the sound in a crib in the sunroom
with nothing over her head but a low roof
and high stars. "Soft voices are the best,"
those words flowing under my flashlight
instilled a shyness in me but not my deep-
sleeping sister, her hair streaming black
over the crunched pillow, her sighs a sensual patter.

As years moved sun
through Venetian blinds, the concealed
weaponry of words faded and
we three walked to church in Easter,
pinned by corsages given by Father,
our protector. And Mother, his patron saint,
mostly stayed home to paint her dreams
in oil or watercolor, to make the seasonal
transition from cold dry to warm wet –
like the red tulips in the garden
pushing the snow aside through wet
sludge. Green that biblical color
centered in black without music
they had this mindless rhythm
taking unknown time to come
to an oval, opening to flaming chalice
water beading on the lip, no way
to copy such redness, like sex
then the blanching, curling, falling

of no significance into a long sleep
reliable as my sisters' love
through stormy quarrels, and later, long chatter.

As years moved fast
past mid-century adolescence,
one by one we left the house
of our father for husbands less tender,
men of passionate ambition
who fenced in our bodies against crimes
of the century and bartered our children
For bread. We adored them, they were
ignorant and we dew-eyed as daisies. If
As we were taught, women hold half of heaven
why did we drop into grief, teeth biting tongue
until two of us divorced and the third
settled in by keeping her mouth shut.
The gardens we would have
tended went to stubble and stone, weeds
flourished and mother-killing became
as fashionable as barbequed meat
but we knew women are made for books
no less than men - it was our father's
teaching that made us goddesses
of the shout, architects of the deep night
and the long day's printout. Yes, yes,
we have survived the street designed
to entrap us, the labyrinth of false love,
for the burrs stuck to our legs made us keen
To escape the accusative clatter.

As sisters we had crossed Detroit
to grandparents' homes full of stories
that became irrelevant to our stepped-up lives.
through we retained that Eve-like faith in
fruit, eating a lot of it for we were the lucky
ones - more able to combat the harshness
of lairs than those who stood
in the hopeless doorways or sat
on the stoops of despair. We could
even camp under chestnut trees where
our voices were sewn back into our
throats. And we could sing to our children
about a man taking great strides across a field
as though he were going somewhere
and a woman who welcomes him with the

raw wind at her back and in her scattering hair.

Now we are re-setting
the cracked sundial, re-designing
the landscape, aided and abetted
by the blood of our ancestors
who water the earth with bright rain.

THE BEATING

Night after night after night
red tide beats in the undercurrent
like a school of beheaded red snapper
moving like a burn
on undersea roads we dare not explore though they charm us
like an enclosed garden behind a door
covered with fatigued ivy –
but you are different
a truant desiring palm-frond kisses
I see blood rising in your white throat
and am afraid for you –
Yesterday we were twinned
in hand-me-down beds of blonde wood You were always making sudden
departures without my noticing Today you are the long distance swimmer
slashing and stroking beyond the buoy
while I tread water
What is our choice, we who left the love of girls behind?
It's so much easier to love women
except for the betrayers, the three-legged cats
“Now they love you, now they don't”
so much harder to hold
the selective service rah rah boys
to their promise of eternal love –
It's like the smell of grass
growing in sand and dissipated by seawind –
the sea sings so many songs I cannot tell one from another
since the beating –
Blood must have rushed to your unkissed throat
at the sound of a man
stabbing your womb with his fist
minute after minute after minute
the unsound of the child within
the never sound of its mouth
defenseless as a small frog with winglike appendages –
I have no stamina to continue
or is it fear that freezes my body
I'm going under in the pity of it –
blur-eyed I cannot tell one fish from another –
predator or protector?