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## Poems

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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?