

new
poets
twelve



angela costi

honey & salt

Honey and Salt

Angela Costi



Five Islands Press

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Honey and Salt

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Note about the Greek language used in some of the poems:

Where the Greek language is used, it is written phonetically because of the way it was written to connect rhythmically to the larger part of the poem (written in English). There are two poems that contain excerpts from famous Greek songs. The first is *The Blood Rose and the Artichoke Heart* which has some bars from (That's life) composed by Dimos Moutsis, lyrics by Yiannis Logothetis, released in 1972. The other poem is *The Village Wedding (Cyprus 1995)* which interweaves some bars from a traditional wedding song (Today there's a wedding). Though this song is about a festive occasion it's also about the loss of a daughter, as she becomes a bride. The poem *Kakopetria* is the name of a village in Cyprus and literally means *Wicked Rock Pile*.

Returning

The ceiling fan cuts and pastes memories.
The photo album is playing excited host.
Anna's plate is draped with sweets, fruit, meat,
glass never emptied of the Island's best,
carrying a full smile all day, her body glazed with sweat.
Uncles and Aunties steer Anna's eyes to the mountains,
away from the checkpoint, the border control guards,
away from the Island's wound that never heals.
They speak like parrots in brittle cages
about the billy goat running into the *kafenio*
about the ripe carobs drooling like large fangs,
only *Yiayia* pours honesty into Anna's cup,
coffee mulled with hurt, a dialect of undying lament:
As quick as lighting a candle, kissing a saint,
we ran from our homes in nightgowns and slippers
we ran and left pantries full of fresh food
we ran and left tables set for dinner,
our bread baking, our soup cooling...
they stripped our homes of all softness,
stained our floors, walls, beds with their mud,
they ate, slept, danced to our music –
each family received one coffin...
Anna holds those chattering hands.
The moon flicks barbaric shadows.
Yiayia closes her eyes, the tears continue to seep,
Anna stands watch over the face she will own.
Tomorrow they will hoard what is left of their future.

The Blood Rose and the Artichoke Heart

(for my Grandfather, Pappou Angeli)

Epping: 20 stations too far from the city,
where trains screech, *The end of the line!*
(passengers prefer not to get off)
where factory workers starve,
where paddocks harvest wild thistles, horned weeds
(daisy-fed cows are extinct)
snakes graze, skinks bask, flies pester in gangs,
where I scramble in towering, tough grass
straggling behind *Pappou's* haste
behind his will to capture the hearts and limbs
of every artichoke daring to raise its head
above his scraggy-pup, whining granddaughter.

Pappou th-e boro, Pappou I'm tired
my body fixes on excuses
Pappou toilette, Pappou
knotting my legs tighter than shoelaces
Pappou teleeoresee, Pappou!
I'll miss *Neighbours* with *Charlene*
and her easy way with English
but grass turns to blue as I slump into sobs
wishing artichokes would go back
to *Pappou's* foreign land.

Pappou is swishing and swerving
dancing the wind
dropping his jaw he sings:
Etsee een ee-zoe, kai pos na teen alaxees
pos na teen xerapsees me moleevee kai hartee
hacking air with a chicken knife
ghosts fall at his feet
allee klaine, kai allee yellane thilathee.

Spiky flowers line up
not daring to jig
they've been waiting patiently
anginares moo, my artichokes,
holding them like a lost beloved,
their prickles are his delight.
I hold two buckets and he a third
while he performs a murderous embrace
with one arm and a sharpened blade
he croons unswerving love.

Mia fora kai yio, eeba na feeyo
abo toos kaeimoos, yia na xefeeyo...
...in my village of sweetness and light
there was a girl not that much older than you
krata moo to hairee, krata to barabono moo...
...one day you'll learn
carobs she plucked from trees
squeezing their juice
the sweet smell of blood rose
the savoury trail of artichoke heart
our honey and salt...
...krata teen karthia soo os boo nartee to broee.

I have no hanky for his eyes,
I have no words to soothe.
Pappou has no time to linger
there are crowns to be guillotined
there's one bucket empty of heads;
Pappou continues this easy war
he's now cornered the big one
the crown of all thorns
the most sorrowful hearted
anginara moo, my artichoke,
saliva running as hungry as memory.
I packed my yearnings, left my regrets,

she stood at the doorway refusing to wave...
when his *Mama* tucked him into her warmth
feeding him the growth of her land
butterfly kissing his stabs of hunger.

For its biggest blessing
he raises his knife to the heavens,
I wait for blinding light, electric storm, rain
but a scream drenches all weeds,
like a plane, he crashes,
red roses spread over his arms,
the knife his embattled betrayer,
anginara moo, my artichoke...
Pappou's song hobbling into prayer
on his knees, ankle to stem, blood mingling
Pappou? Pappou
his eyes my mirrors
my hand grasps for the strong fingers
lighter than petals in the wind.

Field Work

through a doorway, the moan of silhouettes,
on the beach of smooth pebbles in cool shallows,
in bed sheets that smell like harvest armpits,
Karellia smoke and incense linger sweetly,
in a bunk room of a ferry,
from *ouzaki* tainted lips,
in the famous *spillia* where stalagmites steam,
on a motor bike straddling the coast's curve,
in the dusk of a sliced moon,
after a meal of *saganaki* and *horta*,
between Georgiou, Dimitri, Pericles...
the pull of Cypriot manner
into the sly deep smile of Anna's thighs.

She chooses which village and attractions
with a flick of her wrist on a map, though
Anna tells the boys what they expect to hear,
her research sounds important in English.
They relax their ammunition as Anna turns her body
into their country with its nervous checkpoints,
explosive neutral zones, its fertile borders,
compulsory training in strategic positions,
she secretes a few codes they attempt to decipher:
cultural allegiance, birth identity, peasant mentality.
The boys enjoy getting stuck in her trench
while she marches the page over their heads;
they surrender their stories entwined in white sheets.

The Village Wedding (Cyprus 1995)

From the North and the South, each house
donates a white-gowned table
placing them in the middle of the main road
that was once both trench and target.
These tables are blessed
like a snake of purity
with a feast from
every woman's secret larder,
every shepherd's special stock.

*Seemera ya, seemera yamos yeenetai
se oraio bereevolee, se oraio bereevolee*

There's bread with the weave of *haloumi*,
olive and onion, the lamb is dressed
with oregano, garlic and lemon,
the wine is oh so sweet
to please the tired and cynical.

*Yamvre teen nee, yamvre teen neefee n'ayabas
na meen teen emalonees, na meen teen emalonees*

A large voice of uplifting sorrow
wanders in with bouzouki and baglama,
fingers click again and again, the leader
waves the white hanky with one hand,
the other holds the long line of brothers,
sisters, cousins, neighbours,
dancing their history into the dust.

*Seemera ya, seemera yamos yeenetai
se oraio bereevolee, se oraio bereevolee*

The bride unveils her laughter
as she circles the floor
in her husband's arms,
each guest breaks the bridal dance
with a kiss and a gift of pinned money,
the couple dance coated
in a rainbow of pounds, liras,
drachmas, dollars.

*Seemera boo, seemera boo horeesete
ee mana abo tee koree, ee mana abo tee koree*

Shot glasses salute the setting sun,
Commandaria soothes the throats
of hardy drinkers,
as the bride sits astride a donkey
led by her husband on foot.
They take the path to town,
more glasses salute their shadow
and a mother's face glistens with loss.

Kakopetria

Legend and history fist their differences
as Anna scrambles the ridge of Troodos
falls then wakes from her Great Aunt's bed
in a room shared with the village strays.
Questions hang like sons from gnarled trees
left to reek, for mothers to salt and dress
in Sunday-best, those freshly dug up dreams
of tattered creatures cradled by women
who dress like crows, cawing their censure:
*since I gave birth, 24, 44, 64 years of knives
and bullets dapple our babies' skins...*
They roam the fields of scorched apples,
wade thigh deep in Klarios river
to soak but never cleanse old stains.

Anna stalks the escarpment of memories,
reads plaques, brochures, tombstones,
where tragedy is turned into fable:
about candles gathered like lost children,
wrapped in sacred cloth, blessed and set alight
in the last church left in peace,
how the tree at Paphos will grant you a wish
for cure of ailing health or heart
if you tie a white hanky to its branch,
how newly-weds once climbed the grand rock
to wish eternity on their lives as one,
how this rock toppled to kill a husband and wife,
the village mourned for years and years —
now honeymooners cling to each other
as they walk around the rock, reliving their vows.

The Lemon Tree

1.
When I rode my tricycle like a bike,
ten times from brick wall to back fence,
five times around the clothes' umbrella,
five times around the tree and stopped
because my breathing was getting too fast
growing thick fists in my throat,
I had to place all my trust
in the tree holding my weight.
As I sank into its base
it became my hardy bed.

I walked my fingers
around the circle of concrete
clasping my tree like a tight bracelet,
I looked up to see if it cared
being squashed into the ground like that
but it seemed not of the earth
as it stretched up and out
tracing the clouds with the tips of its leaves.
I jumped up like a monkey,
held the branch within reach,
swinging armpits felt splintered;
in pain I swore to never let go
because this tree was the only thing
between me, the sky and the birds.

2.

Pappou serenaded the tree with water and song,
Mama fed it delicacies from mushroom, ox, horse,
Baba chose which *lemoni* to open
and squeeze on our salads, potatoes, pilaf, skewered lamb...
uncles, aunties, cousins threw their trowels in despair
at their spindly trees with their green marbles,
they sharpened their eyes, demanded to know,
what was our secret?
The sun was in love with our jewel of juices
— we must be blessed.

Until winter came in a drunken rage
and threw itself onto the tree,
we felt the moans, the ache of fracture,
the slash... split... loss of branch.
Pappou grabbed a blanket that night,
Mama, four pillows,
Baba, a coffee-filled thermos
and I, a nursery book
about giant bean stalks.
I read to the tree,
we nuzzled its trunk,
our bodies crooning peace,
a rigid picket embrace.
Winter had to punch
each one of us first.

3.
The lemon tree's sap gave birth
at the wild party of grass,
camellia, magnolia, geranium, birds
of paradise and those chirping
from branch to branch
when the cat sprang, slashing the air
my lover mixed avocado
in with the egg, we drank
mandarin juice, brandy and soy
the sun overstayed to flirt
with the moon, our eyes spoke
of so many babies to come
wrapped in yellow blankets
rock-a-bying so gently
we will catch
every one
of their falls.

Peloponnese Sunset

How can you be lonely, you make love to this
environment, the hills have slopes you can swoon on
they have views you can open your thighs to
they have Venetian structures ready for you to take
with one open gasp, they have seas
that melt your gaze, the colour of lilac
if it was blue and black crosses on white churches
reminders of sacred sensuousness
reminders of honey skinned almond eyes
the touch of madness and of chance.

Olive Trace

Mama wanted to reach down into her bloody brine bowl
lift up and through her the animal wet hunger – *are you all mouth?*
It was summer, Australia, backyard, a hills hoist dipped in ragged grass,
blue overalls and white aprons dripping in silence,
two fences away, a radio announcer clothed in static called the final race.
Her head was a childhood of stories and myths, of culture uncured and bitter,
of silver-lined leaves in a village too small for growing appetites,
her hand swept around and around her large globe,
next to her, a ceramic platter, looted of olive flesh, pip graves en masse,
pink trails of *taramasalata*, the lingering smell of fried cheese.

When my small mouth was a cavity of fantasy fire, ice-cream and jelly
and the hospital bed was too hard, too narrow, too clean,
Mama feared I would die of bad food and fed me from
towel-covered clay pots, okra, potato, broad beans in a tomato onion stew
while her mouth poured luxury: stories of her billygoat chasing a tree snake,
of embroidery like butterfly wings for little fingers to crochet,
of big black clouds of moon shaped olives picked one by one for many days
and how my eyes were as big as those olives – *oh I could eat you up!*

The nutty crisp flesh of Queen Green, the soft lush pulp of Kalamata,
the sea-washed dry meat of ancient Thasos float in garlic-salt pools,
in coriander seed beds, in a pantry corner, survivors of the beer-bottle
whack, the accurate slash, the strangle of *Mama's* vinegar drenched hands.
Bottled in the dark like her memories, garnering taste like nostalgia,
changing texture, hue, aroma as often as temperament.
She watches fretfully for signs of ferment, purple-stained bruises, oil slick
mould banks, bubbles simmering with servitude, the whiff of stray odour.
On those special days *and* if we please her, the table is dressed in delicate cloth,
the silver cutlery is brought out and each one of us is given a saucer of olives.

My Signature

At first, the cowering scrawl
showed me up for the girl
wearing long socks in a zipped-up uniform
with a case of too many pencils, not enough pens
then I began to skip, one, two, eighteen, thirty...
counting out those childhood years
well before I drove into the rare night
left the language of small steps
in their tight corners
took my I.D. to help loosen my tongue
voted for all the noble losers...
my name escaped for me
fast and furious it spun
internal circles of stress
on grown-up forms for useless things:
a Casablanca hour-glass coat,
dark Onassis glasses, a black beret,
money from *Baba* for *Mama's* presents
which I secretly wore.
I skipped now using only my fingers
made clones of their loopy lashed names
bed became my new desk
city streets my new school yard
caught trains to towns where I could hide outside
met strangers who pressed into my flurried curves
wanting more of my flippant dotting, casual crossing,
the way my name rode on the cusp of the world
wearing passionate ink with hardly a smudge
all my consonants long-legged and willing.

Black Sheep One

They found her swivelled in her lover's arms,
instantly branded, seared with the hottest tongues
still she swirled deeper, became the second flavour
in the soft serve cone and *Andreas* became the first.

Her husband was informed while tying up his dinghy,
his hands flew up as if to catch those bad words,
the rope uncoiled and snaked into the sea, he fell in
with his shoes, coat, memories, grappled with the water
he couldn't drown her green kitten eyes, her splash
of freckles in the indigo light made her look younger
no where near as young as *Andreas*,
his barber, *her lover*, his sons' barber, *her lover*
his neighbour, *her lover*, his friend.

She wore her guilt like underwear,
only with *Andreas* it slipped off, tossed at the doorway,
was sunk in her pheromone's spell.
Guilt became her second coat worn on the hottest days
when her husband drenched in sea and sorrow
couldn't speak without a fist fixing into a wall,
her oldest boy tried to split himself in two,
her youngest went missing, found blue-kneed at the dock,
she knotted her apron twice, fought only with grease,
stains, dust and longing, found her sons another barber.

Andreas couldn't sleep without her nose butting his neck,
if only it was just the bed where he ached for her,
he couldn't open cupboards, read books, watch clouds,
he couldn't cut her style into the shape of others,
her wayward curls were unrepeatably,
he saw his future as a cracked vase with a dried rose.

He tiptoed back to her with a wave across a busy street,
a smile, the freshest longest red rose, a card, a letter,
love written, love touched, love held.
She turned back to ice-cream melt,
clenched her fist against her heart and said,
Tomorrow is only possible with Andreas.

The Green Boat

Sunshine girl in floppy pink hat
a dress with teddy bear buttons
eyes in love with the world
wants to hug everything blue:
the lake, the sky, Uncle *Stavro*
with knuckles bigger than her wrist
he holds her tight, she might fall
in leather boots, white shirt and tie
how can he swim? who would he call?
her smile is his survival, for now
the water is calm, the wind is sleepy
no wife to pour venom in his heart
she's an afternoon's drive away
only two gulls to mock his pleasure
in holding the Chubby Delight
who wants to know why water sings,
why birds go faster than boats, *if*
she throws her hat over where will it go?
his mouth trickles laughter like summer
tickling her neck, cheek, lips... *more*
tickling her ankles, knees, thighs...
if only utter joy could travel in wallets
be twisted into wedding rings
be hammered out of worry beads
and grow from four to thirty-six
without all those years in between.

Black Sheep Two

My mum's youngest brother is no longer dead,
his photo is back in the album, he's allowed
to talk to his nieces from a safe distance:
from Uluru and several deserts away.
Sometimes he thinks he's still in prison
roars *cock sucker* and *dead shit* at the suits
who walk in his way, punches holes in the air,
shoves his car like a fist into traffic
then he remembers to look up at the sky
lets it fall on him in one whole piece
without barbwire or brick, it feels so good
like Katerina's bosom giving him succour.
Her legs teach him softly.
She's the only thing worth the effort of being
poor and clean, she's half his age but *no mole*
according to his outside men who kept their watch
of her comings and goings for those five years.
Katerina needs his slap-in-the-face toughness,
needs to cry and be cuddled in the dark,
she sits on his lap, nibbling his ear
while they watch the Sopranos, he tells her
for the millionth time, *they know fuck all...*
one day I'll tell 'em my story,
they wouldn't know what hit 'em.

Black Sheep Three

My first cousin could pass as K.D. Lang
though she has shallow acne graves
along the terrain of her cheeks and chin
making her face seem more world weary
than a permanent dartboard,
her eyes shoot out little shocks of pain
when she asks after her mother
then they do a flash dance of anger
when told her mum still holds her cross to her chest,
sobs into a dry tissue about her daughter.
They both screen in a demented loop
the internal footage of that B-grade episode
when mother was shown on that school hour arvo
just how a daughter could stray on a maternal bed,
ears locked within the rump of her best friend,
how that mother's heart rammed into the wall of her chest
and stayed there for years, wedged,
how those daughter's eyes kept playing ping pong
from mother's apron to Lilly's mini, Lilly's belly to that
book about immortal sins
mother kept by her bedside lamp.

On an island several oceans away
my cousin rewrites the Bible
by replacing Christ with a buxom saviour
who takes an axe to the cross and a nun to bed.
She plans to launch her book on Christmas eve
and gift wrap a copy to her mother.

In the Wilderness

He's been wandering lately in my psyche
without animal-skin robes and snarling hair,
in a suit made for those who spin and buzz their words,
the staff replaced with briefcase-sized bomb,
his military cap hardly hides the madness of the divine,
one eye dilated with ecstatic murmurings of surrender
the other eye slapped into blind obedience,
he tries to trap me like the woman selling dead roses
for those in special need, she says, wrestling my guilt.

He heralds my instinct, or insanity
to unbutton, untie, unbelt, unlock and walk, just walk
remember to feed baby, change nappy, secure in cot,
leave the past to fester in all those damp corners.
The night pumps my heartbeat into his arms.
I need a warm bath to baptise the inner mongrel:
animal hankerings, offal tidbits, viscera blood mix
make me infant-fresh and innocent
redeem all my shards and scrapes and scars.

I find him at the computer, searching for renegade churches,
searching for the honest to goodness black sheep,
he turns, I open my robe, out hobbles a crippled heart,
he kneads it like pizza dough, makes it easier to chew
within seconds, he excretes those parts of my affection
I gave like a lap dancer entertaining his troupes.
He leaves me to tidy the mess, swings up on the roof,
his naked arms splay across the TV antenna,
yelling to all of us below, *this is today's crucifixion*.

Shrapnel

The day she decided to wear an explosive belt equipped with a detonator and a thumb-press button, and closer to her heart she wore the companion vest with quilt-size pockets, packed with nails, screws, bolts and led balls (smaller than marbles but made like cannons), was the day I was given the results of my scans and shown my body as a border of bone and organ where the fields were infiltrated with cluster bombs, they spied at least eleven, designed to break the nerves.

This was the day she walked the streets of her world with reverence for trees, houses, shadows and the day I walked the streets of my suburb with reverence for trees, houses, shadows and, as in a dream, we passed each other, she as my stranger, me as hers, each of us bathing the other with a familiar salute.

Later that day, we each walked into a popular cafe, pretended interest in the menu, were pleased to find the waiter efficiently trained to avert our gaze, we sucked in the chatter, the gossip, the shoptalk, the boredom, the romance, the stalker, the loner, but when she opened her overcoat, I wished I were there to have zipped it back up, taken her arm, led her away, back to her suburb, house, room... where she allows me to take off her coat, the belt with its canisters, the vest with its cannons, I help her into her pink nightdress, kiss her forehead, switch on her lamp then slip back into my night, wrapping my coat firmly around my body — if only I could swaddle myself like a baby to keep me from self-harm.

Baby Watching

His charcoal-blue eyes burn for knowledge,
they sift the world in fragments,
between the bars of the cot he sees half a mother,
her hand reaching the door knob
again her silent escape when the music still plays
those ponderous notes
the room now holds one breath,
he can turn this into a cry and bring her back,
he can turn over and stop destiny's growth,
he can search among the room's shadows
which one holds the map, the puzzle, the key?
The things he's supposed to know
the sounds have all walked away,
the sobbing, the snoring, talking in loud whispers,
all the clues to find love
above his head, the cot is pasted like a prison cell,
the rainbow spider sways in and out of the bars,
the bed which holds the midnight tangle
is boxed and waiting, the curtains allow daylight
one step in, the mirror finds another baby,
this one is smaller with eyes ready to gulp
the room's slightest tremble, any sign of her return?
The mirror's blankets begin to fight like starving animals,
he watches a mouth tear out its lungs
and make a sound slashing the room's contents
away from the teddy bear cuddles,
big shadows have marched in, carrying scissors and forceps,
now he must cry louder than his double
for her heart to break in, rock him back to liquid love,
he stops there is that smell to melt all shadows,
her arms, her breasts, the perfect bed.

Elias and the Cherry Pip

When I was little and keen like you
I too held my first cherry and looked
and looked at this perfect world,
a satin blood sunset blush,
a roly-poly gnome's nose,
an elf's bottom bell swell.
I too wished to open my mouth like a mountain cave,
fill it with this silent red bulb,
my gums too tender to crush, gently they chip
sweet little ruptures into the precious heart
until the stony core is reached,
tongue playing tag chasey
finding the slide, all the way down
without a hiccupy tickly prickly cough
to take root in the blossom cell,
growing a trunk with cradle-shaped leaves,
a belly tree with thorny shoots
through the button, they squeeze milk jelly kiss
into a cruel bend of bark claws
to twist a baby into a tree frog!

You sit on your throne, high above
the fizzled loud-shaped toys,
one hand forever stretched in unswerving demand;
the cherry bowl has one more cherry.
You are the knight, the prince, the wizard
with your mystical power secretly packed,
you heed no warning of choking death,
your smile hands me the Earth's soul;
I have no choice, I must give you your cherry.

Elias and the Watery Depths

In the race of sink or swim
you were the fastest
with your cunning tail
ziggey, zaggey, zapping past
the thousands who wilted
in the heat of your victory
and sting! You made your inheritance:
Mediterranean, Armenian, Nordic, Jew
stout-boned, amber-eyed, misanthropes.

Your type of success brought solitude,
the swoops of silence in your ancestral sea
where you reigned supreme as amorphous floater,
made a feast of my nectarous juices,
devoured manna and grew into a perfect freak
of gills and spine, of giant head and midget limbs,
enthroned in my swamp land,
you drank my deeper thoughts,
you mastered my darker moods.

And then, there came your touch,
the flirty flutter, flippery feel of you,
the gurgling stream of *Mama's* secrets
tugging the cord like a telephone wire,
belly to mouth, a dialogue of perpetual somersaults,
our talk of your chances in a world of disasters,
your plea to stay my nocturnal stoker
but Life's yawn was too great; dive into that dread
you did, with each dive you became more and more
fearless.

Elias and the Boiling Wind

It is 3.30 am, I hear the urban rooster crow,
I hear the neighbour's olive oil truck give
a long low grumble start, I hear
your weak whistle breath,
I hold your head, a delicate meat,
a sweet-smelling swamp,
I hold your body, a cotton-rag doll,
limbs like fish awash the shore.
Where are your babbly gurgly whirly words,
your topply turnover thoughts?
Where has the boiling wind blown them?
It's been four days and five nights,
the flannels have spent their lullaby soothe,
the tears are too tired to trickle,
your heart is a tremor of doubt,
the silence between us is immeasurable,
you are blown beyond *Mama's* stretch
at the borderless brim you stay stuck,
your eyes rolled back to visit baby ghosts,
you play with them hide and never seek
while I whisper peek-a-boo to an endless echo.

Calliope's Final Story

(for my paternal and maternal grandmothers)

Long ago, we grew babies like markets stock fruit
so many, splendid, ripe, bruised.
A mother nursed her garden from bed,
five cots, if lucky, for eight or nine.
One bosom became the village well
a wandering creek or waterfall
suddenly escaped our flesh,
a steady river gushed into a suckling mouth
to silence twelve cries, and then more
when the neighbour's wife went missing.

We named them after patron saints
to please eternal life and stop it from snatching
until their bodies were ringed like trees
so ready to sigh away.
We knew the story before it was told
from grandma to mother to us
of one, two, so unfair, if more
wrapped in dark night's blanket
taken by sleep traveller to its side of the moon.

If traveller was an angel,
my baby was blessed.
If traveller was the vampire,
baby's baptism dress was buried
under a cross twice its size.
If traveller wore gypsy clothes,
I would pray baby a better life.

My grandma lost three,
mother streamed luck, only the one:
little sister dream-kissed our cheeks
then flew into her angel's wings.
My seven grew into five,
the two curves of my heart are missing...
some memories, like some babies, clutch stronger than others.

Inheritance

This photo album of quiet deaths:
a century of solemn sepia,
in sudden dramatic release
from your recurring nightmare.
The Shades are no longer achromatic
insecure heroes, they welcome you
with a black-and-white slap,
with a tale as vivid as that
told by a priest in red satin
preaching about a mother who never had sex
to those who thrive on fear.

There stands the great old woman, aggrieved
in black, she holds the parasol like a pet bat,
during harvest time, she shooed her children
like flies; the baby was tied to the leg of the bed
(he could stray when work had to be done)
a bowl of soup slop, another of water,
a whole day to play in the grime of the floor,
to wonder which side of mother, tears or fists,
would come home for the night;
the newborn left under a sun-torched tree,
a whole day under this whimpering tree
for ants to nest in her mouth and eyes;
the other six as agile as circus animals,
hoist themselves over fences, slither
under barred gates, slip through windows,
a whole day to scout for anything edible.

See how your grand aunt holds the shovel
like a giant spoon, to stir the earth;
on a dry winter morning,
when her husband left for the dock,
she took the fish hook used for large fish,
numbed her dread with swig after swig
of burning brandy and tore out
that stranger's trespass,
more lizard than human
it drowned in a broth of blood,
she took her shovel,
made a doll-size grave
among her potatoes and parsley
for no one to sense except
the cat with sharks' teeth
who pounces the mound.

And here, in the faint smirk of day, the young *Yiayia*
in white, tulle sails her head of starched waves,
marooned in a dress meant for her oldest sister,
she hazards a grin to have it swiped by her father
who cradles his other daughter's ache.
Betrayal mars her cheeks yet she clings to *Pappou*,
marries their traitor, keeps his blooming seed
and lives on the other side of the world;
there is no laughter when clinking glasses,
they each spit on her face to herald her exile
and present the unbreakable curse of their backs.