

PERSÉ

Suzanne Gardinier

*I still can't remember when / or how I lost my way  
Neil Young, "Cortez the Killer"*

*I have come upon it, I have come upon blessing,  
People, my relatives, I have come upon blessing,  
People, my relatives, blessed.  
Navajo Blessingway*

1

At the edge of the cove near where my mother's / brothers laughed  
& threw nets  
The *guanábana* in the sand where they fell / Three palms talking  
in the wind  
When I heard them I was dreaming my aunts / laughing when  
Mama say Gather enough  
To make a pile like this & her sisters say Dee / Those girls gonna be  
out there all night  
  
& before we left they told us / what to say & which way to turn  
& how to listen for what the day / whispered in the night  
& when to go & when to stay back The sky / watching the fisher  
birds & the fisher birds watching  
Our village as old as the first palm's seed / & new as one wave's spray  
  
& some dead forgetful places When someone / fell out of the  
meshes & lost their balance  
The places the soldiers found Embers / they breathed on until you  
could almost not hear  
The thickets stammering through burns The stained reefs / The  
choked springs coughing all night

In the places where there had been messages  
Where we / were  
messages Before the captain came

A new world A flock made a scatter of bones / A nest made a pit  
grave next to a spring  
They had to drink too Didn't anyone teach them / what comes up  
from under the ground  
Not the gold they preferred to freedom / Not the world they made  
called Hell  
Looking down into their own reflection / as the earth called their  
old lost names

That their children would be filling our baskets / with our cut hands  
generations hence  
On the banks of the Congo the Solo the Sola / the Mekong the  
Mississippi  
That the earth they tried to make kneel as they breathed / on the  
embers of our division  
Would burn & their breath become part of the burning / That a  
theft leaves a gap That what's buried grows

Sometimes in the dark of the *cimarrón* caves / I could see the  
design of their plans for us  
A net stretched across two trees nailed together / Like the place  
where they tied my aunt's youngest girl  
The soldiers fidgeting in a line while they waited / Later one drew  
her With snakes for her hair  
But it was fire After they cut her / & put her face where a baby  
would be

This was the place they kept promising us / If I tell you does it make  
it come nearer  
Or keep a witness who also remembers / how she laughed with  
*guanábana* smeared on her cheeks

How we opened & shared one when we were thirsty / The seeds at  
the tideline gone by morning  
Scratching our backs on the *cocoteros* / The *cocoteros* thumping  
the beach with food

Scatter them he said Meaning the people / His gesture like flicking  
mosquitos away  
In front of the guarded pits for their hoardings / Little prisons for  
gold & food  
If we'd had a map of their hell If we'd learned / to breathe there  
long enough to recover  
The time we lost in astonishment / when we could have been  
figuring out what to do

To find & repair the torn meshes that made them / make a world  
where the living would envy the dead  
The seams between that world & the next / Where hell isn't under  
the living ground  
Hell is my aunt's youngest daughter still there / in the middle of  
what had been our village  
Where my father & his brothers have to pass to sing / to the sun  
coming up in the morning

& the way the memory of night Of fruit / Of someone's mama  
braiding her hair  
Of the birds' voices not paying attention / Of the sun on the water  
before & after  
Of the old ones laughing & lifting the babies / Of how we thought  
of ourselves before  
As the sweetness of an unbroken body became / a curse & we sent  
it away

So who was there In what had been the village / of what had been  
a man & what had been a girl

When my father's brother reached for me / The man they called  
Haydé  
Made someone else Someone they made / kill someone else at the  
mouth of their mine  
His hand flecked with gore & wet gold dust / His strong hand that  
had lost its way

When he took my wrist The way you take / the neck of a fish just  
before you break it  
To spare the people the torment of hunger / & spare your relative  
the torment of air  
Under the ground would have been a blessing / The ground that  
kept my mama's salt smell  
The ground lost when he lifted me up / & brought me here Where  
I live

2

Life lighting torches to look for her daughter / Life braiding her  
daughter's screams  
With the useful parts of her ancient fury / & the free place she sees  
in the dancers & in dreams  
Life replaying the last time she saw her / Tangled in the hunters' nets  
Life gagged & drugged & blinded / Life made to wait in the hope  
she forgets

Life exiled by the settlements / Life following the green to the south  
Life in the fugitive's wild honey / & the last unbroken horse's mouth  
Life they hear rumors of & try / to find a way out of no way to meet  
Life paying the captain's ransom / with the soles of her  
undocumented feet

Life with a question Have you forgotten / Watching the  
masqueraders whirl  
Standing apart from the soldiers Life / whispering to the crucified girl

Life pressed to the cell wall to listen / Life whose laws the yard  
sparrows obey  
Life mocked & cuffed & booked as subversive / Life with her clothes  
torn then taken away

Life called out of its names & customs / Searching nine days  
without food or rest  
Life looking east for signs of beginnings / Life learning how things  
end from the west  
Life with her undelivered letters / & fresh sorrow that forgets how  
to fade  
Life up late playing variations / on the tune of the ache the captain  
made

Life that knocks & asks Have you seen her / Singing the grief song  
after it's banned  
When the bought guards come with doctored warrants / life  
laughing & spitting its teeth in its hand  
Life's thousand names on the magistrate's docket / Talking so true  
it can't be heard  
Life arrested Fingers laced in the chainlink / For spreading a  
fragrance For spreading the word

Life scanning blueprints for alternate exits / Hacking the systems  
with honey & night  
Life resurrecting the murdered dances / to teach the walking dead  
delight  
Arkwright life To get someone to listen / Building near where land  
used to be  
Paintsmith life Smearred with outlawed colors / Writing on walls so  
someone will see

Life coming to find the dreamer / at the bottom of his brothers' pit  
Life disobeying his fathers / in the freedom thirst his fathers lit

Life patient Life stumbling Life faithful Persistent / Hollering over  
traffic noise

Kissing the boy who sold sweet potatoes / Singing the names of  
the shoeshine boys

Life they tried to strangle with honor / Life with its tenderness  
seen as a curse

Life without weapons except sedition / The naked fighter The  
bearded nurse

Learning to walk again after the rack-time / Lifting its unemployed  
hands from its sides

Leaving the school of ruin to wash / in the slack water at the turn  
of the tides

Life watching currents for usable wreckage / Life without  
documents climbing the fence

Life arriving with his hands & his hunger / & one dollar and twenty-  
five cents

Life looking for his kidnapped daughter / & her sisters he does &  
doesn't call his

Masked life Impersonating an absence / Life gone missing But  
look there he is

Life made to laugh by her fugitive brothers / in the key of defeat In  
the key of blue

Life rumored apprehended & buried / under the arch the soldiers  
march through

Life with the rain finding her pockets' / cancelled eviction edicts &  
deeds

An expired visa A note from her daughter / A bloodstained rag & a  
handful of seeds

Life swimming between island prisons / Trying to read the captain's  
blurred lists

Life hiding in a harbor city / in a heretic corner the searchlights missed  
Lank life finding rapture in breakfast / Breath ecstasy to life almost  
drowned

Finding underworld in high offices / & sustenance stirring under  
the ground

Life at the seam between this world & the next one / Life told  
what's been will always be

Life carrying an unstamped passport / & the weird blurred memory  
of somewhere free

Refusing the swallow of prison water / Holding out for reset jubilee

Life walking with two notes in her pockets / One that says Deliver me

### 3

Take her down After dark / Whisper but she can't hear you yet  
The terror bending her like an archer / before she figures out who  
you are

The edge of one eye watching / as you untie the knots of the  
sailors' rope

Made from hemp from a far field calling / to this one At the edge  
of a beach

Where they cut the crown & the branches & tied her / to the waist  
of a guanábana tree

& one of the branches to tie her arms open / as if she were  
welcoming them

You've heard that part of the story haven't you / The sacred theft  
followed by the sacred marriage

We were all one family it says / on the settlement gates & the  
plantation crests

& they've written it on her body In what / in another world would  
be waters of life

Blood & come Tears & sweat / Streaks of salt from the nine days  
they kept her  
She's trembling as you work Like the surface / of the bay when  
winds you can't see pass over  
Like the mice dropped from the hawk's talons / when something  
goes wrong & they live

Her ankles first So she's almost standing / The almost successful  
attempt at displacement  
Rilling into something else as you free / one wrist The other wrist  
& she falls With her back to the rising / moon's face blurred with  
what look like erasures  
Falls as if all her bones were broken / But not all the way because  
you're standing there

& you hold her the way you did when the winds / seemed to be  
tearing your island in two  
& she & her new name small enough / to fit in the crook of your arm  
Your arm wrapped now around the waist / of an attempted  
dislocation  
The young woman you last saw laughing / now whispering *Mama*  
*I'm done*

& the ripple of it passes through the leaves / Over the bay Over the  
sand  
Where the turtles crawl back to where they were born / to bury the  
next generation  
& something else passes back as you walk her / toward the river  
where the others are waiting  
You who remember what it is to learn / to walk then forget then  
walk again

& when she hugged your knees & couldn't / take a step without  
leaning on you



& when she was learning to walk on the beach / & you stepped  
back & held out your arms  
Your mother's & your grandmother's arms / The arms he tied  
behind your back  
& she took one step & you laughed & said / *You got a long road  
ahead yet Persé*

What's ahead is written on her body / You can read it holding her  
with your eyes closed  
The sound of the wheel of repetitions / in the ache of the rope on  
the tree  
The women's hair brought to collect the bounties / The broken  
balconies of al- Mutanabbi Street  
The boy at the corner of Amsterdam & oblivion / whispering *Got  
that ready rock y'all 2 for 5*

But you're walking her toward something else Up ahead / by the  
river The smoke of the fire built  
By the people who remember / a few recipes for resurrection  
Mixed with the salt-sweet smell of the water / & you hold her &  
rinse her in the shallows  
Sometimes it can take centuries / to figure out who your people are

& to distinguish the theft of a daughter / from the uninterrupted  
dance of the seasons  
To distinguish nature from power / & winter from desecration  
To translate the rest of her interrupted / messages from the matrix  
When she was a possible dawn inside you / Waiting in a place the  
sailors couldn't reach

*Persé Persé Wake up* & the river / touches her deep as what needs  
uprooting  
& her voice or someone's moves through & she shakes / the way  
something wild shakes to get free

*Persé Come back* & they wash her / in what they know Listening  
To her grandchildren in her fingernails In the drummers' / fingers  
& the dancers' feet

& they call all night at where she was / torn at every open place  
& you say the name you all gave her & hell / retreats from her  
disfigured face

& the songs & the blossoms on her brow the color / of the glint of  
dawn on the heron's bill

Make a light to see what's up ahead by / The ways she won't walk  
again & the ways she will