

## Elizabeth Bradfield

### AFTER ALL

This is why I won't  
have them after all, though  
I love the warm curve  
of their foreheads, their babble  
and tangle of hands in my hair.  
Though I have sought them  
as teacher and false aunt, drawn  
to them, the heavy parts of my body  
drawn to them, let  
my sisters have them, answering "none"  
when asked years later what dreams  
had been thrown over. Answering  
none, and meaning it.  
I know I have wavered

and sometimes longed,  
but let me say now  
that even if what fluid things  
passed between us  
included sperm, I would not.  
When I write that I want  
to shake your teeth  
from your skull or wonder  
what else could have filled  
the space you take, you know  
it is my heart's downpulse  
and its own incomplete truth,  
a thing created to be released. But  
to live with the measurable growth,  
the doorjamb penciled higher  
each year, the vocabulary  
approaching what of this world  
is difficult, comprehending, making  
an individual sense—

202 Janus Head

I would want to hate her,  
mock her, love her wrongly  
across the page, daughter  
I will not have, in poems.  
And I could not bear her  
to read them.

UPON THE RETIREMENT OF LIBYA'S LAST EXECUTIONER

He would offer each  
unclean soul, as he called them, a cigarette  
before he walked them to the bench,  
laid them down. And since their bound elbows,  
bound hands could not hold it he would

hold it to their lips as they  
pulled the warm smoke in,  
standing in their visible breath.

Then the silver release.

Libya's last executioner  
has retired, there will not  
be another to replace him,  
and he speaks in French, translated  
by a woman, about his work. Her words  
over his words, are his words.

He answers how it worked: the  
placement of ropes, the moment to rip  
a collar and better expose the neck's  
stem. The executioner says

he feels himself less accountable  
than soldiers, for the lives he's stopped  
were singularly judged. He says

he would go home each night  
and stand beneath water as hot, he says,  
as skin can stand. Once, though, his duty

was a woman  
who had poisoned eleven.  
He regretted her.

*She was beautiful* he says *I love*  
*women* he says in French, and we  
can hear underneath the translator's  
professional voice as she repeats his words  
so that we can understand them, his regret  
and, through that, one of the few words  
in his language recognizable by almost anyone.

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