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—

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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.

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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.

November, 2002

MEGACRYOMETER

All summer, April through October, the boats haul loads of passengers out to see whales. Their wakes disappear curtain parted, falling closed.

Above, contrails dissipate into sky. Quick scrawl. Nothing close to geologic in its time.

But in Spain, the weight of that white scratch comes to about 22 pounds—once the vapor is ice crashing through roof to kitchen tiles melting onto the floor.

It's because the sky's a little warmer, because jet trails now linger, gather mass, and drop this meteor of ice, too long from its source to be understood.

I have no data of what satellites leave in their wake through the atmosphere-less sky, but there must be a sign, too of their passing, a skid in the sun's pulsed rays, its electromagnetic beam.

Look to shore from the sightseeing boat's stern. Waves on shore. Rocks and driftwood roll higher, roll again. Shorebirds are lifting off, hauled out seals are flopping down toward the water.