

Zara Raab

Humboldt Co. Winter

California in the 1960s

To begin, the usual rain-soak,
turning the ground mud-thick
in the north-county bottom lands.
So a winter rain falls for a week.
Week follows week, till mountains
warm with rain begin to melt
and shed into the river gorges
filled with broken debris of bridges,
the bric-a-brac of railroad trellis.
Who doesn't know this element?
Streets and houses awash in silt.
Cracked pumps way before this
smearing spongy ground in grease
around the Esso, soon washed out.

Traveling from school in early June,
I pass the towns, house on house,
the builders' ore, pried loose,
wrenched and rusting liver-brown,
lumber strewn across the ruin
below a lonely crying mew
circling down the inlet.
I stay back, do not get out.
Narrow escape, drowning, rescue:
Beware of nature, warned a prophet.
A moonless night falls like velvet,
as if Earth did not know these cares,
mere human, mere "flood of tears."

Phoebes

Of our *fee-bree fee-bree* and the whispering winds,
you know zilch! Articulate fact
your realm, the exclusive reserve of truth
and lie, spoken there only. So you
philosophize. Falsity, Truth. . .

Words! Words! What matter, when we are?
You're born, you begin to walk, spend nights away.
One day you leave your habitat for good.
All this swaddling — the womb, the cradle, the cookhouse,
the sleeping dormer, *the coddling*. After that,
memory only repeats, repeats.

You utter strings and strings of syllables —
discuss, repeat, and speculate, discuss. . .
We know the peregrine and fox, a song
by us, *fee-bree*, would just call them over.
We go about our business, they, theirs.
They seize. *Fee-bree, fee-bree* the sole debate.

Zara Raab

Alice, Wakefield Asylum, West Riding, 1853

If the asylum at Wakefield's a town,
you don't notice: the others come and go,
like Mr. Preston, once a Gomersal
shopkeeper, who assists the vicarage —
an honest man and well-liked — if
“completely, magnificently mad”
(he thinks that he's an old-world prophet).
He learns to play the violincello,
composes tunes and sets hymns to music.
Fiercely he guards his inner spark of god,
yet speaks kindly to all and labors hard,
while you, a lady, wake the others up
each night with cries that hang over the ward,
the mystery of madness incarnate.

The poor, driven from their old ways of life,
will take to drink, go mad. What drives Alice?
All here are poor but you, a well-bred girl,
so say the Reverend's copious notes:
Alice, a scholar's daughter, governess.
(English nobles have learned their French from you.)
Why are *you here*? The record's a blank page.
None speak for you, no one elaborates.
Without a doubt, though, some deep wound was dealt,
some hurt, or unrequited love, else why
this distress, this sealed refuge, this walled yard?
All day you wait and watch for clouds to drop
a pair of wings you'll don for flying off,
into the gentian skies of Riding? . . . Love!

The world's in need of love! — This lunatic
fallen to drink, or that worker who thinks
he's Christ, or the prophet called Elijah.
Did you, Alice, ever so much as touch
the tin drawer's deep-scarred face, a man
with many bairns, still young, who call for him?

Did you say kindly words to Mrs. Wrath
as you passed her in the ward's hall? Poor girl,
brought here straight from York Castle jail.

Mother to half-dozen little ones,
she held her seventh babe and strangled him
using the cord of her thin dressing gown.
Had you befriended her, she might have lived
though childless now, like you, beyond the year.

No friend comes to speak to you or Nurse.
None, through 20 years abiding here.
Yet inmates spoken well of — see how
the Reverend's written — all thrive,
whenever wife or sister come to call.
You're young, you'll live another twenty years.
Alice, if you must be crazy, do choose
delusions more amenable to those
who live next door. You might become divine,
blessed and simple — like Gomersal's Preston.
You must know you can't shout and punch your way,
insisting you're due the favors of rank.
Alice, knowing firsthand the wire that scours
the mind, I'd speak for you, oh, if I could —

Pony

Both my brother's wives were women our mother
could not abide,
and because he was her first born, and smart,
because she had yet to see
the full consequence of her tongue, she told him so
in no uncertain terms:
he deserved better than he got — an older, experienced woman,
dressed in moo-moos like a brightly colored tank,
a smoke on her lip.

That didn't last long! The second wife,
if possible, was worse, as she went, my mother was sure of it,
with other men from the bar where she worked.

No doubt our mother's rancor — her whole personality —
owed something to genetics, but I can't help thinking
the big black dog that bit her on the face when she was a kid
had something to do with it.

Mother's grandfather, "Old Sam," had said to her father,
"You stay here," while his siblings —
mother's uncles and aunts — went off, out of the valley.
The valley had been good for the old man,
but then Old Sam had come across the Plains
on a lively, roan-colored pony in the last century.
At least he'd seen a bit of the country.

So Mother's father did as he was told —
it was easier to stay than go, maybe —
Mother's father stayed, and raised a family,
and so when the dog bit Mother on the face,
her father had to high-tail it over the hill, and from there,
ride a dust-filled road to reach the Sherman place
where the doctor, a man who had once been a doctor,
came back with him and staunched what he could of blood,
and lay her in the back seat of a borrowed car,
driving a hundred miles to the nearest clinic.
There she stayed for months — she was terribly anemic —
living at the house of a nurse in town.
In town!

Maybe this is what sealed the tight bond between her two sisters,
pushing her out, so when she finally did go back to the valley
the sisters cut her off, my mother, a girl who'd had a bit of luck.

Maybe my mother did feel special; maybe she bragged
of things she'd seen in the nurse's house, on the streets,
sidewalks, parks of the county seat.

Maybe it was this taste of town life,
or maybe it was the young men from the city
who came later to stay in the cabins her mother —
enterprising and careful always, with money —
had built by the river,
summer rentals, mostly for young couples, a few with children.

My mother talked once about her crush for one of the young
men,

But nothing came of it.

What did come was our father, brash, insistent,
handsome. She'd need that brashness to leave home,
crossing the coastal range for a new life — in town.

In town now! She was a town girl!

But she didn't fit in there, either. Not really.

So the bite of a big black dog, the chance to spend time in town,
the break with her sisters — all that, mixing with her DNA,
meant my mother not knowing better couldn't abide the girls
my brother, her first born, chose for wives.

My brother lost the second wife, too, and she came to thrive
in that town, re-marry, own a bar, a house.

He got on well with his dogs, though — big black labs he kept
in his tiny back yard.