Midfire

Running through all those days and nothing caught me but the price of grain and the odd book written or burned. The weather was off. Fruit trees bloomed in winter and the locusts came, shedding wings like angels. There were flames in the sky and we lost all urge to forecast. There was no truth but that found in the black belly of the streets of the empty-throated town, swallowing, swallowing. My lover visited. Taking my arms he said This is no apocalyptic dream. But I knew that. I knew, too, that there was much more we couldn't say before he went east to exile and did not return. He wore an embroidered coat as he waved out of the train, waved, and our words were as little use as locust wings. Planes rode in like the times roaring, each one a gasp from the mountains, moving out of hearing to stumble into the sea. I had a nightmare of ladders, rising, then bursting into flame and crumbling above me. And the dust was thick as dew, grinding into our skins like glass and it shone. We had run out of time and virtues.

as in a child's bad dreams
we have entered badly
like soldiers in hobnailed boots,
goose-stepping soldiers. We weren't
beginning and it wasn't
a dream, all sirens raising
the night and the sounds of engines
close by. We tried to
add it all up and got
merely sunrise. Try putting
that in a letter to someone
in exile. Try naming that.

Hero At The Gates of Hell

for Bette Tomlinson

I'm afraid to ask the right questions. The ones that elicit instruction and guidance: how to hold a tree against weather, my hands against time. If only I hadn't come to this, seen how shadows hold a greater light across the darkness. No one will believe me. And when I return I will invest everything with strange new qualities. The morning sun will brighten my room in a way that will seem new, and when I wake to it, leave my bed and cross the cool floor to hold the pitcher, feel the good clay and its weight of clear water, I will think how the moment is so beautiful no one would ever know it's not perfect.

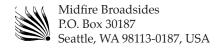
MIDFIRE



Neile Graham

A sampler of poems from Spells For Clear Vision Brick Books, 1994

Shortlisted for the Pat Lowther Award for the best book of poetry by a Canadian woman in 1994.



My Grandmother's Photograph

The wind tonight is not quite spring but holds a fragrant hint of soil, and blind shoots wake to that scent.

In gusts at once warm and cool there is no room for bare feet or women like white birds in Grecian gowns. It's not yet May and sixty-five years have spun by. She's dead, who in this photograph presses naked feet against grass, raises arms to dance, a white shawl drifting like feathers from her hands. She knows nothing yet. Her confidence, tender as a bird's.

I can't trust the web spun between us to bind her, it's stretched over so many years.

Looking at this girl, I wonder how much I would explain to her, how I could warn her that her first child will be still-born.

Defying the doctor to conceive another, she'll take a pin to the French safe he made her husband wear. Her daughter will bear me and I will remember her old in the mahogany bed lying in regal darkness at the curving hall's end, never dreaming of this white-gowned girl with waist-long hair stepping into the history of her life

and mine. The wind pushing through her to me is fecund with dreams and mud and doesn't tie us. Each movement I make toward her is another step in her dance, another breath of wind pressing her forward into the season.

I remember gathering

her sweeping hair into a widow's bun. Her hair still dark as distance, yet light as birds and the girl I create of her.

Washing at Sunset

My hands touch the water and I'm crying. Simple as that.

I keep trying to put things together, more than tears and water while the sun, squeezed between cloud and mountain,

focuses warm as a hand on my back. I don't move. Wondering why the sky opened like that, I see myself in the water with the sun behind and the dark shape of the water nodding.

Nodding as if to tell me *yes*, say *yes* to the man in the doorway who has asked me to stay.
But it's not that simple, nothing is. It's all too tangled

in years and the ways my body knows his and knows nothing at all. And it's this that I fear—the sun setting over the mountain like his mouth on my breast and me wanting to push it

away, to run out into the street

naked, laughing. It's too late to tell him lies. The sun on my shoulder is his hand and our motives are certain: the parody of self

that is sometimes beauty.
The warm flesh. The fear
I want to name love.
I'm afraid I fall through life
and learn nothing—it is simple as that.
Simple to lift

my hands from the water and turn to face into the sun. And I would say simply *yes*.

Copyright © 1993, 1994 by Neile Graham

Acknowledgements: "My Grandmother's Photograph" appeared in *Dandelion*, "Washing At Sunset" in *More Garden Varieties II*, "Midfire" in *Primavera*, and "Hero At the Gates of Hell" in *CVII*.

Spells for Clear Vision

ISBN 0-919626-74-2

Brick Books, Box 20081, 431 Boler Road London, Ontario, Canada N6K 4G6