

Her

by Paula Gocker

“all day in the garden, moving rocks.”

--Dorianne Laux

is this what she did before
she planted the tree, before she turned
over the freshly made soil, before she carried
water in her cupped hands
was it later that she looked up at the bird's
first nest and leaned against the bark after the heavy
lift and turn did she look up at the leaves cut out of sky,
did she never think twice about the way
she walked from his body to be on her own, it was
a new hunger and, oh, what hunger
for music's first breath, and then for words, as they
gathered behind her eyes, in the back of her throat
she dreamed not of more but of rivers with depths
and tributaries, a day dreaming mind, the apple
in her hand not even a thought or a flavor she knew
until tired after a day's work and hungry for the fruits
of her labor, she did it and we are glad

Lamentation

by Paula Gocker

this stone we all swallow is biopsy, is CT scan, is
world without context, war Questions remain—
are any of my friends, can I go home

my mother, stranger, friend and friend and
who can carry this knowing
no one in the country I am in—oh, sky,
split open, oh, descant soar

the workmen outside
aren't tethered to their ladders
to think we thought there was only

one garden. one boat.

who isn't exiled drowns or opens
a broken window. some days
we are never home again

to speak how, there is no
any more. if I had a chord in my throat:

what would be enough, where is
prayer-no-longer-in me

Oh, cave
in the Italian hills, oh, sanctuary, oh, long
walk, oh, night—

make me tired, make me sing
make me find the opening in the water
show me sky, bring me
breath, bring me seen and unseen

a kind of new

My Mother's Birds

by Paula Gocker

who wouldn't hear
what singing completes us?
--Li-young Lee

later, I learn her teacher painted the rose-colored bird

still, my mother painted the branches, the yellow
clouds in a blue sky. My brother

says he saw something he never saw before
the tops of waves on Lake Ontario
blew into the air. Eighty mile an hour winds

lifted them and there were rainbows
everywhere. I waited
seventy-one years to see
the sky my mother painted.

For years she stood on the cliff
waiting for sunsets, rising
below the horizon. Alone
I saw her from a window
my mother and not my mother

she tries to tell us but
words are birds she cannot
we suggest words that fill in her blanks
or take her in another
direction. They say
sundowning but she means something

there are no words for there
are no words
for there are
no words for
this. Still she shows us
the way though she doesn't
know if she's eaten or what hour

I learn scientists believe
the drawings on the cave

walls were done by women
all those years and
now I sleep through
an earthquake reluctant though
I am. The walls of the world
are thin. My mind's noise is not

her noise. There are
birds I want to know. Flowers, too.
In upstate New York big pine trees
hold birds that flail
to the ground. The wind is unseen.
Some days the power
fails. Oh, Mother, so far away
what bird, what bird
next and who will? Tomorrow I will

go out on a cliff. I will be
waiting, brushes in hand
while just below the horizon, the wind
lifts and I will gather
words enough
for two. I will inscribe
them on the cave walls, place them
on the branches where they will
take flight and no one
will see them go.