

V            E            N            U            S  
K   H   O   U   R   Y   -   G   H   A   T   A

## *Early Childhood*

*(an extract)*

They colonized the country at nightfall  
beat back the trees with rifle-butts  
made the fire flee

Our smoke brought tears to their vowels' eyes  
their consonants caught fire at the mere sight of a match  
We had smoked their green tongue with cannabis  
kneaded their white tongue in our bread-boxes  
lain their red tongue down in our beds  
drowned the blue one in our ink.

Their chilly tongue was hung in our attic in flood season  
shaken out over the railings to scatter the last crumbs of silence  
dried on our rooftops when it rained in their alphabet.

★

She drowned all the cats  
and all the vowels  
drew a mirror on her wall  
the swallows that crossed it left their black cries on it  
and the sun left its roundness

She wrung out the cats and the vowels  
seated them on chairs  
erased her mirror  
crawled under the furniture in search of the crumbled alphabet

★

Our cries, she used to say  
would scratch the moon's windowpanes  
and scrape the corners of tombstones which milked the moon

My mother set the long slope of her back against us  
to interrogate the walls' dampness  
decipher saltpeter's crumbling alphabet  
translate the symbols engraved on the city's underside  
which she only knew in profile  
as she never ventured further than her shopping-bag  
rarely crossing the uncertain borders of her lamp  
City which sent us its rejected rains  
and sometimes a wheezy snow which hooked its flakes into the  
    pomegranate-  
tree's ears

The planet must be cleaned up!  
God must be cleaned up!  
my mother cried, tying her apron

★

Clouds played no part in this story  
their shadows on the roofs were not necessary for the unities of  
    time and place  
they served as simple landmarks for whoever taught algebra to the  
    nightingales

The village was so spindly  
you could reach it by leaning a ladder against a patch of sky

The poplar tree was spindly too  
will it be the same translated into French  
will it answer to a name that perhaps won't suit its branches  
used to conversing with an Arab wind  
which postponed autumn for a week so they could finish  
    inventorying their leaves.

★

Here there was once a country  
fire withdrew from women's fingers  
bread deserted the ploughed furrows  
and the cold devoured all children who wore a daffodil on their shoulders

Here there was once a wall  
which reproduced itself in prosperous times  
became rectangle square but never circle  
so as not to humiliate the fountains  
which held the copyright to day's roundness.

Here there was once a hunter  
who knocked down his house to go into the forest  
and verify that his shots pierced the eardrums of the rocks

Here there was once a pebble  
which turned into a gravestone at the mere sight of a passer-by

Here there was once an infinitely white night  
an infinitely black tree  
which pulled its bark up to its chin  
when noon lengthened shadows down to the ravine

Here there was once the echo of another echo  
and the horns of great cattle which melted when even a wing  
passed overhead.

*(Translated by Marilyn Hacker)*