

**J. C. TODD**

**The Damages of Morning**

*Daughter*

Hunger-gnawed, and raw  
from grubbing for bugs  
in deadfall or moldy seed  
the soldiers overlooked,  
my fingers reached for a fleck  
of gold tarnished in the thatch  
of shell-pocked field.

What depth of empty drew  
me? The empty I'd known  
from the grain basket's maw,  
from the ricey dust that powdered  
its weave, the paste it made  
on my tongue when a sliver  
of ice thawed into spit.

The empty of *won't eat*,  
that vow I made on each  
new moon when I'd wake  
to Mother's sob and the bitten  
knuckle that silenced it,  
my *no* to her failure  
to produce a crop whose yield

outlasted war and winter, as if  
a daughter's self-denial  
could reverse a curse  
or replenish a larder,  
the god-barter a mother wagered  
to eke a family through.  
For six months I'd fed on

bitter refusal. I knew  
the buttery glint within  
reach wasn't low-hung  
sun's all-knowing wink  
but the yellow-eyed squint  
of a narcissus marking  
its food hoard underground,  
bud of a terrain below  
my mother's cultivations.

*Commander*

I learned to long for the damages  
of morning, ruptured buildings, scorched  
and cratered fields, for a brigade  
of four-limbed men up and out of  
the trenches, dazed and grimy,  
horrified awake and hungry  
for schnapps, bread, a skirt before sleep.

Without a mother, she was no one's daughter,  
just another pretty to pass around,  
the first thing my men caught sight of  
that might leach from their flesh  
the char and stench of bombardment,  
saltpeter burn-off and under it  
the regrettable sweet of early rot.

There are ways to enter one  
so wounded—a gypsy's salve  
to knit what forcing ripped  
and struggle ripped again,  
a poultice for the swollen mouth,  
later, one to heal the itch.  
A few weeks under lock and key

in my quarters eased her down.  
Thin soups, tinned biscuits, the grub  
an army eats, a feast to her.  
Lisle stockings, a foolish trinket  
stripped from a corpse, gifts  
an officer can command.  
When she lifts her eyes to me,

I pat her cheek, open her mouth.  
I drop a caramel in as if  
to implant in her a girlhood  
such as I gave my daughter, Ruta,  
darling songbird of the parlor  
where on my sweet accompaniment  
she rose beyond the reach of war.

*Mother*

So packed tight with silence that cave,  
even the idea of it, is redacted by  
my presence. Dark matter of  
earth, terrestrial and sensate.  
Without sky, air inside me bruised

blue-black, a char that blocks sight.  
I live as a body of longing, visceral,  
cells spinning into clots and thinnings  
of a decay no one speaks of except  
when death is too clear to refute.

Not yet. She has not come back.

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*Earth*

They cavort and die. I persist,  
My motion not a quest for power  
Or longevity. Theirs is; thus

Their brevity.

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*After*

into the blank  
*scherschnitte* of a face  
sketch what might be  
the seed of a face  
replanted  
after long absence