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.
Earth

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

Their brevity.
After

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