

JENNIFER WHITAKER

The Invention of Childhood

Believe it: father made the world just for you—
the sunlight fluttering like ribbons in a pony's mane,
the river that pony a child leads through the hills.
This lullaby he licked clean: the riverbank
peddling hellebore's fat pods, flowers antique and verdigris-hued.
The fence he painted the dulled color of comfort. Believe it:
he made you this lushness, these extravagant blossoms cut and vased.
Made you a porcelain tub, mildew-slick,
and called it *river*; the water flushed red,
clear again. Made you a bird shot through
with light and called it *defiant girl*.
Bang, he points with forefinger, thumb straight to heaven,
the tiny eye an explosion of red. *Bang*. The neck a soft torn cloth.
Bang. The beak shattering to dust.