Athene noctua

Your memory brings no warmth, Minerva. Even seven years after your death, I turn my face from adult women who lovingly embrace their mothers, look into their eyes, and speak their secrets trustingly, as if to a Little Owl sitting by their pillow.

Always girded for war, your permanent wave

as cruel as a Corinthian helmet,

you drove off your infant supplicant, screaming,

'Didn't I say, don't touch my hair!',

as if to do so would breach your ramparts, bring ruin upon the Roman armies and cheat you of the sacrifices owed: the Danish dining suite, ducted heating to every room and drapes of silk shantung.

And so, for tactical reasons I withdrew even before I could speak. Trapped in that empty house

with a raging goddess,

my father away, my brother at school-

I don't know, but perhaps I grew more freckled, less cherubic,

cut the hair off my dollies and poked out their eyes,

stuffed them head-first into their pram and

pushed it into the mud where I'd been making pies.

Yes, perhaps I grew spider legs.

If I am Arachne to your Athena, mother-

if I am that accursed girl-turned-spider, I will neither be drawn to the offerings laid upon your altar nor seek the envy of the ambitious, but rather attend to the arts you neglected, lowering my sword to honour the passing of the green world and weaving a cloth rich with the lives of small things: a company of Nodding Greenhoods, bent in contemplation; the flowers of the Common Heath, like careless girls in sheer white shifts; a damp society of Scented Sundews, opening a cache of stalked glands, each one loaded with a deadly droplet.

And I will imagine the girl you once were, tying your hair in rags at night, the strips torn from a dress your mother had sewn, shortened, lengthened, taken in, let out, for one child after another. All night you turnstep your knobbly head in search of a smooth place. And wake in the morning to coax out those curls step with a practised hand

and toss the rags on the dresser.

Here, in an old box brownie, you lean against the ship's rail perhaps on your way to London with friends, a dimpled immortal in an Omo-white blouse, a milky firmament about your head, still knowing nothing of waking to wash nappies at the edge of a city without music—

still thinking you had escaped.

Look! The salt-laden spray has flattened your hair and the wind is flicking those loosening curls, but you

smile and smile and don't seem to care.

And I see you, my mother, in your last months, mouth opening to take grapes from my hand,

eager as a toddler for sweetness on your tongue, and for the first time in half a century you are free of that perm—that fearsome *kranos*, with its fixed cheekplates and boastful plume. Your hair falls, straight and unremarkable, from your forehead onto the pillow. No more will you shuffle forward beneath that grim, bronze bell, blinkered, deafened and shivering, your temples bruised, your bewildered spear raised against your children.

Like an angel, dementia sweeps you up in his arms, running your life in reverse, vignette by vignette, recasting you in roles that need no headdress, until at last he lays you,

helpless as a foundling,

swaddled in a box at your mother's front door.

Only at nightfall does the owl of Minerva take flight¹.

¹ Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready. History thus corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering' (Hegel, preface to *Philosophy of Right*, 1820).