

Barbara Buckman Strasko

## World to Lean On

A spring orchard against mountains in a lavender sky, I painted  
this morning so I can live in the deep purple of this world.

Rachel Carson said, "Nothing lives unto itself." If one thread is altered,  
its destruction follows, ending one small microcosm of the world.

Matisse stands before an open window, giving us a glimpse of Notre Dame  
in late afternoon. He is looking into a future interwoven with a past world.

I taste a sandwich on Chapala bread near the Smithsonian: thin slices of lamb,  
micro greens, tomatoes, olives. Beet salad with pistachio in a Spanish world.

I celebrate O'Keefe who painted New York, not as it was, but how it felt, crying out  
between clock towers and church steeples, saluting the soulfulness of the world.

At home the tiniest grape vines on the arbor hold twenty inches of snow.  
They've bent, but they have not broken under the heavy weight of this world.

In the silence of the river behind my house, the fish swim freely under ice  
as I begin to dive inside myself, again asking why I am here in this world.

## Chagall

was born dead, then brought to life  
by someone who dipped him in a pail of cool

water at the same time a fire raced through town.  
He said his father's clothes shone

with herring brine. When his father lifted  
the heavy barrels, Chagall's heart twisted

like a Turkish bagel. He watched his father stir  
the fish with frozen hands. His Jesus was a Jew.

In *White Crucifixion* the villagers flee the fire  
carrying the Torah. In his self-portrait the artist

poses by the canvas like a dancer against the yellow  
pine floor and red walls. The Eiffel tower looks in on us

through the window, and the artist's brush  
moves in flames to the tune of a fiddle.

## **A Ribbon Around a Bomb**

He paints her as gorgeous plant forms, flamboyant plumage, delicate tears, thick eyebrows the wings of a blackbird. Years before, red, red, blood flowed from the bus accident. A painter in the seat next to her had a pocket filled with gold dust, and so she lay naked with golden specks spilled all over her, naked and bleeding on a billiard table. In the hospital death dances around her, and her thick black hair sprouts on the white cloth of night, the pillow and sheets. The yellow blanket grows roots while vines climb the bed post protecting her contented sleep so that her skeleton rests on the canopy as she blends with clouds, legs hollow, one arm clutching lilies to her chest, always floating there, always asking—

## First Day of School

In the city a child waits for me—  
she's perched on her front stoop  
unsure how she will get herself up  
while her mother sleeps,

or how she'll keep track  
of her brothers  
jumping fences into quiet  
yards they have no business in.

She wonders what route she'll take to avoid  
the girls who have declared  
they *hate her more than anything*  
and how she will face the boys who  
know her father's in jail and why.

She is not sure how she will  
get permission to walk the noisy halls  
to my office, or what I might say when  
I read her poem on crumpled paper.

She only knows she will wait there,  
and I know when I see her  
I will remember the line of starlings

I saw this morning, making  
new designs on wires all the way  
down the bend in the road,

each new design another word  
I gather from our sky  
to give her.