

Three Poems from *House Crossing*



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Indologist and poet Laurie L. Patton, Ph.D., is the seventeenth president of Middlebury College (Vermont). Her many publications on religion, mythology, and literature include *Bringing the Gods to Mind: Mantra and Ritual in Early Indian Sacrifice* (University of California Press, 2006), *Who Owns Religion? Scholars and their Publics in the Late 20th Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), her translation of *The Bhagavad Gita* (Penguin Press, 2008), *Fire's Goal: Poems from the Hindu Year* (White Clouds Press, 2003), and *Angel's Task: Poems in Biblical Time* (Station Hill Press, 2011). Dr. Patton has selected three entries from her *House Crossing* (AmazonUs/INDPB, 2018) for inclusion in this JIRS issue focusing on interreligious studies and the arts.¹

Dr. Patton and Dr. Mosher were participants in a roundtable session on *Interreligious Aesthetics: From Dialogue to the Senses* at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. During her term as president of the AAR, Dr. Patton appointed Dr. Mosher to the Religion and the Arts Book Award jury, which she now chairs.

HOUSE FROM A DISTANCE

On a train
in a country
where I knew some,
but not all,
of the words,
I saw yellow flowers
spiraling off
the embankment.

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As they sped by,
I wanted to say,
forsythia,
but they could have been
gorse, or *daylily*,
or *snapdragon*.
I would have struggled
for those words, too.

Then it appeared
in the green swathes
of the window—
someone's house,
perfect as a pocket.

I knew
behind its sweet walls
there were aunts waiting,
cousins
who bounced balls
in greeting,
baths
with wet footprints
on the tiles,
vines
whose tendrils curled
like small hands
around fences.

The infinite second
exploded then.
The train flew on.
I watched
the flowers mutely,
no longer struggling
to utter their name.

WELL

I came early.

And in this,
all the dreams make sense—
dreams where I float,
remembering a past life,
a sweet tendril
that I still hold
curled in my hands.

A woman
appears often—
a woman and a girl
hallelujah
she too is always
floating in a womb

She came first
as an old woman
tumbling from a closet
in a gully,
draped in sadhu's cloth
turned away from the moon

Then as a younger one
lying in the watery reeds
near a hill
with perfect lilies
and a wind so sweet
it lifted her hair

Then she rested
in an island pool
with limpets and red algae
pale as a shell
undisturbed
by the storm

Then she stared
from within a grave,
peaceful and still
so that scholars
might discover
her perfect square
of a tomb

Like Miriam,
these women at the well
declare survival
the highest level of all

They are the holders
of the soul
that came early—
washed, fetal, ancient
hallelujah

GRAVE

“The difference
between house
and home
seems to have been
the moment
we began to bury
our ancestors
near us,”
said the archaeologist,
with an elegance
given only
to those
who touch bones
on a daily basis

Which moment
I asked
as the lights came up

Was it the hour
when the boys
broke the stone
of that grave
in the neighbors’ field
and we ran
to put flowers
on a broken slab
for weeks after

Was it the day
we made up
an ancestor
who lay
under the lily patch,
unrelated to us
except in our stories

Was it the month
the dog dragged
a perfect skeleton
of a squirrel
from the cellar
holding it gently
as if afraid
to undo the patterns

Or was it the year
we finally began
singing back
to the voice
behind the door—
the one sending music
long before
we were born

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