

The poems in Sunni Wilkinson's *The Marriage of the Moon and the Field* show us history, affection, private struggle, and the common life with a kind of grave, irony-tinged happiness that is rare in the poetry of our time. Her poems turn away from complaint, as though she had set out to reveal instead the domestic life of intelligence in all its color, warmth, and depth. This is a very fine debut volume, worth treasuring; and more are sure to follow.

—**Christopher Howell**

Sunni Brown Wilkinson's poems sustain a compelling tension between the macro and micro worlds. Scientific facts of the physical realm collide with intimate interiorities. She turns a steely eye and a tender heart toward the experience of living fully in the rush of the NOW and the flickering echoes of what came before. These are lushly rendered poems to savor and/or to devour.

—**Nance Van Winckel**

The
Marriage of
the Moon
and the Field

Sunni
Brown
Wilkinson



Black
Lawrence
Press

For Sean, Cael, Beck and Cooper

And for Jude, a hand on the other side

Contents

I	Translation	3
	Smoke Signals	5
	My Son Says He Has an Owl Inside of Him	7
	Girls of the Underworld	9
	Approaching the Threshold	12
	Two Sides of the Same	17
	Nesting Dolls	19
	St. Francis of Assisi Church, Vienna	21
	How His Fingers Trembled	23
	At Last the Light in the Trees Wavers	25
	The Body Carries Its Own Light	26
II	Tiger, Hyena Still at Large	31
	Kelly O'Brien and the Choirs of Heaven	33
	Connie Wolf, the Lady Balloonist from Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, Confesses	35
	Gumballs	37
	Envy	39
	Mary Cassatt	40
	Crawley	41
	Little Owl in a Dark Room	42
	Fall in a Triptych	43
III	West Yellowstone	49
	Quake Lake	51
	Culinary Arts	52
	My Possible Pasts	54

	Acrobats	57
	The Spirits Called Legion Speak	58
	The Hidden Honey	59
	Wake	61
	Concertato	62
IV	Passage	67
	Childhood at Home	69
	Autobiography With Birds	70
	Trade	71
	Fairytale	73
	Butter on the Bread and Honey on the Butter	74
	My Grandmother Returns to This World	76
	Like Two People Holding Hands	77
	Talking to God Who Smiles Like Buddha	78

*There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world,
and none of them is without signification.*

1 Corinthians 14:10

This world is the other world.

Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*

I.

Translation

To speak to Moses, God
put a stone in his mouth, put on

a sackcloth of verbs (*want, need*),
cleared his throat. Cried out.

The same way the meadowlark
uses five notes to call us

back to the burgeoning world,
or the burkwood

near the hospital doors
whispers of my father, the unbearable

softness of his face and the bright up-
rightness of his body: a feeble house

for what will live forever.
The same way the ghost enters—

humbly—the brittle hardware
of our bodies, or hidden fires hum

in all the wires of the house,
shuttling what we live by. It's

how translation works,
conception. Not St. Elmo's Fire

but a light bulb. That's why we kiss
with cracked and speechless mouths,

why the captured lark is silent.
That's why the bush burned.

Smoke Signals

It starts like this: evening, a boy in a dorm room
calls home. He's casual, but with each joke
he pulls the looping phone cord closer,
trying to shorten the distance

between himself and the old life.
On the other end, his mother in her tasteful
makeup and cream-colored suburban home

knows it
the way she knows there's a God
and asks him what's wrong.

It's an old AT & T ad, and the music starts.
*When the people you love come through
loud and clear* a man says,
and you want to cry. You want to sleep

inside that moment and believe,
as Machado says,
that we are good in the good
sense of the word. *Reach out and touch*

someone. My father called home the night
he shipped out for Vietnam. He'd signed up
to camp and fight and sleep
under the stars, but he couldn't say that
to his mother. Instead, he said

nothing. She traded *We love you*
for *Okay*. Fourteen months in the jungle
of regret. We all feel bad. We're all heartsick

sometimes: strangers in the architecture
and burning incense at the temples,
the names of ancestors in calligraphies of smoke
we can't read.

Aunt Peggy shipped my father cigarettes,
though she thought they were bad
for his health. He smoked them at sunrise
before the shooting started,

sent the smoke up like a signal
that was neither loud nor clear.

My Son Says He Has an Owl Inside of Him,

soft with large, sad eyes.

The snow has not stopped falling
all morning, and I am pregnant,
and the baby is soft and has eyes
we can't see.

In the garden,
white slowly smothers
the flowers, lights lining the walk,
the goose-necked gas meter ugly
in its protrusion.

Gone.

What falls now
remakes the world.

Inside me an orchid
unwraps itself.

In the exam room,
on the black and white screen,

particles swirl around the child.

What will he find when he comes?
Was it worth the work of making

himself?

Loose matter gathers
around and inside him—

a snow globe settling.

Even when the doctor turns off

the screen, prints the images, something
falls into place,

something crouches, unwinds, prepares

to fly. All day I wonder
if the world is enough.

Pieces of light fall
endlessly.

The owls inside us open their wide eyes.

Girls of the Underworld

The beginning of the names
are strange, but the endings
the same. That long *e* stretching
out, giggling or squealing.
Like the string on the end of a kite
or the mean little tail of a bright-eyed
shrew.

Persephone, Eurydice.

~~~~~

These are the wages of beauty:  
to be both captivating  
and captive.

They took to wearing black  
to blend in. But their faces  
were the flame  
on a lit match, their hair the smoke  
that gave everything away.

~~~~~

One had a good mother.
That helped. She tried to fish the girl out
first, with a long pole,
but the god there found it, broke it over
his knee. She buried a message

deep in the earth saying,
Eat, and you stay.

That night in the god's dreams, the girl
was a peach. In her dreams,

he was a pomegranate.

~~~~~

She wasn't alone.  
Another girl showed up  
with a snake bite  
and a husband  
who could sing  
just like Dylan, though his tux  
was tattered after months  
of searching  
and he wasn't good  
with rules. He couldn't  
carry her out  
like he wanted, like the day  
they got married and she danced  
in the meadow and the little house  
waited in the oaks. Instead,  
he had to walk in front  
like a criminal,  
his one look back  
a slamming door.

~~~~~

The first girl awoke
to hunger. The god in the doorway
was waiting.

Approaching the Threshold

“Dr. Alejandro Hernández Cárdenas took a scorched-looking, decomposed head and five stiff, bloated hands and gently submerged them in his secret solution. ‘After they soak for three days,’ he said, ‘any scars, lesions or birthmarks the victim might have had will reappear . . .’ His technique, normally applied to full bodies, can restore murder and identity clues.”

“Doctor’s Bath for Corpses Reinigorates Cold Cases.”
The New York Times. Tuesday, October 15, 2012.

1.

He started with Gerber jars
filled with cloudy fluid

and teeth. Now a mummified
head waits on a table

while in a tub
whole bodies soak, Jacuzzi-like.

The women of Juarez
are salvaged like junkyard parts

from the desert. (Parts
they never found—nipples,

some toes, fingers severed
at the knuckle.)

They’re brought here in bags,
submerged

until they talk: birthmarks
blotchy as stains

bleeding back,
highways of the palm

resurfacing. Mothers and lovers
come to read them

like fortunes. Message
in a body, a door

unlocking.

2.

My six-year-old reads of monsters
and mythology: sea beast curls
over ship sailing into blue
and a woman with snakes for hair
(how does she comb it?) kisses gorgons, and a girl
trapped in the underworld spins. Eats pomegranates.
Chews her nails. Was it hard
to get out,
even when it was time? Did she climb
underground volcanoes, swim up
the whole ocean, dodge the sea beast and pull
herself fingernail by shoulder onto shore?
Or was there a door?

3.

When planes go down over the ocean
and people search for the black box

that sings *ping ping ping*
like a submarine,
who is searching
for the door to the room
the lost entered
like a party
they'd always heard—
pulsing—
and were finally let in?

4.

On the stereo, he plays ballads, love songs,
woos and comforts dead women in a den

of puce liquids and glycerin. *I take many girls
to bed*, he jokes, holding their bodies at night, *but not*

the way you think. He carries them to the bath
the way a man carries his bride

over the threshold. Slowly the women return
to a state of origin, like Pangaea

on a screen in fourth grade geography,
the parts moving back into place.

5.

On our tour of Lake Union,
in a bus that turns into a boat,

we watch the rows of floating
houses sway a little. I wonder

if the doors swell, if stepping
from boat to doorstep

is tricky. Or do you leap?
We stop for photos

in front of a yellow house
owned by a TV star.

He hosts a gameshow the old people
at my oma's rest home

watched. They would drift
forward in their wheelchairs,

swollen and tired, staring
at the red curtain,

waiting for that moment
when all the prizes are unveiled.

6.

My son reads *Choose Your Own Adventure*.

In one called *Mystery*

Of the Maya, someone kidnaps a girl,

hides her in a temple
of ruins. You have to find
her. You have to save her

from the men in masks. Every moment
counts. Every turn
a different door.

7.

In Juarez, a man lifts pieces of a woman
from the bathtub brings her
back to the night it happened:

she waited for the green bus
to take her
to work in *maquiladora*.
All around her women
thin frames long dark hair just like her—
a hall of mirrors.

The green bus the edge of night
and all the women
stepping on.