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 turn your knobbly head
in search of a smooth place. And wake in the morning
to coax out those curls 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 flight[1].

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).