

Kenneth Sherman

Poems from 'The Book of Salt'

First Eve

“This version speaks of a ‘first Eve’ who quarrelled,
whereupon God turned her back into dust.”

This is before the myth
of the rib, before the male
generations.

I am the woman of sand brown breasts,
beige buttocks,
eyes dark as mud.

Shaped from earth
with Adam,
I demanded a share
in creation.

He changed me back
into dust
which in His cosmology
is silence.

Now the generations tread:
servitude, power, nothing
changes.

 Only the earth
is eroded.

Prophet

I keep from men. I scour
the plains, the bald, ancient mountains
eroded into softness, into silence.
Their colour is ochre and dust.

At night I sleep by a crude
altar, the stones
spotted with cold blood
and I smell what remains:
sweet cinders, ashes, the black
scorched fat.

These regions are treeless.
By day, no shade. And I learn
to walk in all directions.

Do you have an expectation
that I descend on a wheel of fire
and enter the squealing pigsty
of your life, or rage like wind
across your confusion which you call
your "age", or fill your pockets
with the heaviness of stones,
which is rhetoric?

Perhaps it is true, perhaps you require
this ballast of language
as you walk the avenues
in summer, in a chalk white
suit, as you stop
and reach out, your hand trembling,
to touch your ghost negative
reflected in the cool,
the darkened glass.

Rebekah At The Well

Rebekah at the well,
all the world's water
is in your hands.

I have come here,
a dispirited traveler.
Before you, after you.
the large slaughters,
the sunken cities, the children
their tongues torn
lost to the swallowing sands.

But here, for this moment,
my brothers and I
smell the sweet absence
of history as you unwind your jar
into the deep dark
clothed in moss and fern
and offer these words:

*If the drinking is bitter
turn yourself into water,
if the water dries
change into the light
to which the hands of the suffering
reach like leaves.*

This is your gift
which the men must accept:
to leave off their hardness,
to let their scabbards
fill with words,
to emulate their camels
and in rest
meditate upon distance.

After your offering
you turn and walk away,
the jar of water
on your head.

I admire your balance
as you join your sisters
waiting
in the shade of a tree.

We have not yet earned
their company.

I drink
and trace the coolness of the water
as it moves
through the branches of my body.