

Shadows of Starkness
(Africa 1986)

The afternoon sun hit the mountains face on today,
illuminating the upthrust three-quarters of their bulk
 lifeless as a moon landscape.
Implacable black angles dissect grey rock
and skull shapes stand sentry above
while we live our valley life in a fable of endless green
 our gardens, our wildflowers, our streams
all in the shadow of starkness.

Last night I dreamed my husband's family died
and this morning I gave him the tender deference
due the bereaved, playing at being a survivor
without losing faith in this valley life of mine
death as distant as the mountain peaks
 and as looming.

I remember seeing a town in South Africa
nestled at the foot of a red-cliffed gorge,
jagged shadows reached across the vineyards
toward the train station where a sign read
not "Ravenscrag" but "Orchard." There,
white men emerge from houses cool beneath red tile roofs,
 they treat their blacks well
and live with as little guilt as you or I
in the shadow of their country's starkness.

Amber Hayward