

ALISON TOWNSEND

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*PERSEPHONE UNDER*

In truth, it's winter I like best, though I would never  
have said so before descending that narrow, rocky trail,  
all the flowers in the world winking out behind me, nothing

but a few kernels of corn clutched in my hand. Before that  
it was impossible to imagine what it's like down here,  
though I sometimes tried as I fell asleep, the doorway

into dreams wavery as old glass, the mattress a boat moving  
beneath me. But it was nothing like this permanent stillness,  
even the sound of the river we all must cross like black silk

slipping under ice. No wind in the bare oaks, no moon, no stars.  
Nothing but this hearth, its red core glowing like a forge  
where the world is made. Up above, life pulses on.

Girls wash dishes, get their periods, brush Maybelline  
onto their lashes. The lines in their faces deepen as they marry,  
have children, their lives twisting and turning like yarn

in my mother's hands, the fruitful earth an endless  
round—green breaking from each seed in tiny flames, bees  
everywhere, a frenzy of apple blossoms falling into grass

like snow. Mother's so angry I left she's gone on strike  
and hidden her face, hiring out as a nurse in Eleusis, dipping  
that stupid boy in the fire. As if she could ever replace me,

Persephone, the one she turned away from for five minutes, the one  
whose name means "She Who Shines in the Dark," the one the dead  
reach toward, hands held out for the pomegranate seeds I provide

as food for their journey, the work of comfort mine after Hades makes his selections. They know me for who I am—Soul Sister, She Who Tells It Like It Is. The flame of my torch warms their faces

into small suns I cradle in my palms before I plant my scarlet kiss and settle in, listening to their stories as they pass between worlds, their words caught like bones in my throat: *It was like the silo swallowed,*

*burying me with grain....After all our shows together, I couldn't believe he'd hit me with the knife....I felt the bomb strapped against my body, beating like a heart....They burned my baby first—some hard, some easy,*

each one a journey made alone. I write them in a Morocco leather-covered book, its pages decorated with narcissi, pomegranates, snakes, and sheaves of grain, where seeds sleep, waiting to sprout again. I thrill, tracking

one word to the next, liking it almost as much as sex, though I'd never tell him that. *Under* is the quietest room around, a place so still I can hear my thoughts, twittering like finches in the bush outside my window

when it snowed at home, the only thing busy in this peaceful place. The dead do not cook, or send e-mail or make love or take showers before rushing off to work. All they do is wait to tell me their stories, patient

in death as they never were in life, art and gardens the only countries where we get to live again, my job more like Mother's than I ever imagined. As I listen, my pale hand with its ruby ring moving slowly across a page

that shines like a snowy field, writing a tale where we come to a house in a dark wood and find inside it a mortal family sitting around a fire, rosy-cheeked and warm, the air alive with the sound of human voices.