

Sheilah Britton wrote the following poems as part of *Poesía del Sol*, a partnership program of Mayo Clinic Center for Humanities in Medicine and the Creative Writing Program at Arizona State University.

#### Stem of a Flower

12 February 2008

The Lord is my strength and my song Psalm 118:14

You went home to put your house in order.
Sweeping, washing, scrubbing did no good.
The house within you waited
While your soul scratched at cobwebs,
Shook dust from the corners of your mind,
Opened clean the chambers of your heart.

Here in your new house, there is hope. You smooth cream into your feet, Swollen, cracked, burned by potions To make you well.

You have been given time
Glad for a chance
To change. Each moment now, another love.
You take advantage of the night
To know the mountains, stars, the wind
Spring outside your window.

Joseph sleeps beside you in the chair Mama guards your rest, rubs your feet.

Like the stem of a flower, Your daddy gives you strength, Your mama blossoms into pretty petals, In the center, You rise on the wings of dawn.

## Grasshoppers

21 July 2008

Grasshoppers in the forties
Brought a plague to Minneapolis.
Cacophonous music rolled through alfalfa fields,
Thrashing corn, spitting tobacco juice.
Indian sunsets gauzy with swaths of moving shadows
Against autumn skies.

Those northern boundaries fought back Pumping arsenic into fields, into dirt, Into wings whose songs grew faint. Silent. Poison with a thousand half-lives Lived in the playgrounds of your youth.

An operator and a line-man,
For Mother Bell—one on the road, the other at a desk.
Your lives were connecting
Through wires and switchboards.
Phil married his secretary. *You*.

Two daughters, a son raised.
Homes in Loveland, Mesa.
A trip to Mississippi, to repair
The ravages of a wind named Katrina.
Twelve disciples, twelve days
You earned the love of a congregation
That fed you soul food, rocked to gospel songs.

The grasshoppers returned year after year.

Poison arrived in your skin,

Hands swelled, soft layers of flesh hardened, fingers left you.

Your eyes smile in the soft, desert light of your room

As you talk of the four laps you walked today with Phil,

Smell the sweet fragrance of herbs in your kitchen,

Settle into a book when you return home.

# **124 Steps**

4 September 2007

How many years would it take to remember, Leaving the green sod of Ireland With just the memory of your father— Hands tugging at your mother's long skirt, John's still small fingers plucking the strings Of a Stradivarius he carried across the Atlantic.

County Wicklow to Ellis Island
Days rocking on the water
Your mother's grief softened by the promise
She kept to your father.
Dan Seed was waiting
When the ship arrived.

In Bisbee, 124 steps up, on top of a mountain Your house rose a mile into the sky. In that house you tried to race The darkness from your room. Your kite carried you from the mountain—A brother brought you back in his arms.

Other islands with names like lullabies Claimed you when the war broke out in the Pacific. You were there with the first Marines who Shipped out—until the final days in Sing Tao.

As a bulldog at the University, you studied history, Played fast-pitch softball, Lifted beers with Chuck Southern. He, in turn, led you to Betty in the English department.

Sixty years later, she calls you Pat—
Speaks of your daughters and your grandsons,
Says that you love to dance.
Betty still can see your little yellow Ford
Parked at the bottom of 124 steps leading up to your Bisbee house,
Just below the water tank.

## **Choosing Equations**

8 April 2006

In the way he chooses mathematical equations
Enters them into a new computer and watches them plot
Out a beautiful image—his life blooms and stretches
Into story—travel, adventure—fantastic luck.

I was a fortunate person.

Halfway through the century
He enlisted in the Air Force.
Thirty-five miles northeast of Seoul,
He watched the night sky, identifying aircraft—
Friend or foe.

Back home, he settled into studies, An engineering degree, The math and mechanics of life. For thirty-two years, the Navy claimed his days, Electronic systems coast-to-coast.

And all those years, he and Dan flew their own plane Gliding above the California desert,
Dropping from blue, blue sky—
Watching the air below them
Grow more brown with each passing year.

Nights now, he and Phyllis watch the Arizona sky From their home in the Prescott hills. The Australian shepherd pup, the twenty-six pound tomcat, And little Samantha's paws ticking across floors.

Soon he and his nephew will fire the forty-caliber pistol At the range just around the corner They'll smoke albacore in the big green egg As constellations appear above, Elegant algorithms of the sky.

## Finding the Words

27 February 2008

In this room on the edge of the Sonoran Desert You are searching for a word, A word lost in conversation. You close your eyes, ball your hand into a fist, Form the vowels and consonants Into the sound of triumph.

You and Wesley leaving Utah for the beach, San Diego, the Navy, children on the way. San Francisco, where you received your first letters and learned how to pack a house and move where the Navy sent you.

You relied on the sounds of words—Delicious, multisyllabic words.
Words men lost in jungles,
Words paralyzed in the left jaws of women,
Words that children never heard or spoke.

Moving, traveling with Wesley, Five children before you said, *that's enough*. Settling down in Bethesda while the children grew, The geography of their lives rich with adventure From their days as they moved with you.

Wesley stayed in Washington, buried on a hill In Arlington where Skip has seen the white stones fill a knoll, quiet and green before. Now hands of children touch those stones.

You moved to that house in Utah
The one your father built, adding rooms at your Mother's whim.
The little old lady down the street, back home in Holiday.
You reclaimed your identity,
Searching again for words that others might speak,
Then for data in the Genealogy Library,
For the long strands of your family,
And all the families of the world.

#### Sakura

1 April 2007

The spring of cherry blossoms arrives.

Joyce, born on the southernmost island of Japan
Opens like the pink-white flowers,
Brown smiling eyes, ears growing
To hear the words of her children
And grandchildren.

Joyce, in the city of angels Took on the role of white winged spirits Caring for mother, sister, husband, friends— Loving, the way a woman does.

In the salon, she and William
Tugged at the hair of other angels,
Gently washing, rolling, teasing into style
Beehives, shags, tightly curled blue rinses.
Hands busy with tonics and gels
Conversation, friendships being molded,
Weaving lives through every strand.

In Los Angeles, Joyce, thick black hair reflecting sunlight, Walking in the street, to friends, to market, home again. Her hands at night clacking needle against needle, yarns becoming afghans. She listens to tenors and sopranos, watches Japanese and Korean soap operas, Kobe Bryant and his Lakers, graceful figures slicing ice.

Sakura, all the trees of the world bloom in this spring, Ephemeral echo of beauty and grace, Of Joyce, And the pink-white petals of her life.

#### In Jemez Pueblo

16 November 2006

In Jemez Pueblo there are hands, generations of hands spread across deep red soil scratching magic from the ground. Hands marry soil with water, building coil over coil, the architecture of softly rounded vessels.

Your hands remember
The hands of your grandmother, your mother,
Handed down, you said.
Handed down through my family.
So much a part of you
you didn't have to watch—
the flicker of film reflected in your eyes
while your hands danced with clay.

Flying from a truck two years ago through starry New Mexican skies your hands forgot the choreography. Cracked ribs, a broken collarbone—your lungs and liver took on water meant for red soil.

Red soil waits for all that water you let flow from your body. Deep green, wild spinach in the gardens of Jemez, waits, too, for your hands to lead its boiled blackness into graceful lines.

The soil will know when you return, when after the sun falls below the hills, your arms, strong again, form the coils for a wedding vase—separate chambers for bride and groom, your mind's eye image of a possible heart.

#### Ocean to Ocean

3 April 2007

This room is full of you— Grandmother, dad, stepmother, Pamela, wife Rachel, And your child growing within her still small belly. On this, your first anniversary.

Born in Holland, raised in Curacao You came to the desert by way of Oklahoma. Here you are, still feeling foreign— Longing for the calm of the ocean.

You write in a journal Frustrations—how you've had to fight all your life. *Since I was seven*, you say. *Since he was three*, your father counters. *Since he lost his mother.* 

Your smile fills this room
Spilling out into the quiet corridor, where nurses bustle,
Study charts, prepare you for this day.
How you've fought the enemies of your body
Your own liver failing you at seven,
Two others never taking hold in that same small year.
Still, living fully, fearlessly and freely.
To-shin do.

Your hope fills this room.
Enough to know that on this day
Sometime—a new liver, a new life.
Another chance to be a chef,
To smell the warm, blue sea,
To name your babies after lilies and oceans
And mothers.