For Mabel: Pomo Basketmaker and Shaman

Medicine song
moves air
into filaments
of flying skin: lets us believe
how we felt
the tear-forced storm
push our hands
into god;
the grasses weep upwards
into a sky, grey and black
and tan like a basket,
in circles and oblongs
and platters of blue.
In monotone daylight
is the sound
the sound of healing bone.
Red Wood

The remotest days of
our growth in China
are sweeping
by my throat; in that song
I hear the sherds
of frost-white grandmother
peeling the red bark back
along the tall trees,
deftly skinning the forest
with her eyes that become
black stars
through which we see
each other as we dance.
Huffing, leaning
on right-angled sticks,
the weight placed wrong
we touch
and twine knee to knee
our feathers swinging
back and forth as parts
of the animals we are.
Our feet powder
the painted hill dust
and raise valley fogs
of blue and yellow
as we stretch and turn our toes
to lift acorns up from the earth.
Giving these back to the trees
we rain on them
and rain on them
leaching the taste
of lightning
from their souls
til they are ready
with acorn mash
to be swallowed.
Being one moment the owl,
then antelope, then bear,
then hornet . . . Grandmother’s guessed
in the handgame a good guess again
and her pink granite hands
scoop up all the shells.

Trickster

Trickster’s time is not clicked off neatly
on round dials nor shadowed in shifty digits
on the earth; he counts his changes slowly
and is not accurate. He lives in his own
mess of words, his own spilled soup. He sees
when you are spread and trapped and numb; when
you have stretched to your limit and cannot bear
to hear the frozen words circle above you like ravens
and, like grubs, stretch into fleshy songs at your feet.
Trickster turns to wind, Trickster turns to sand,
Trickster turns walking off with your singer’s tongue
left invisible, left groping for direction.
Trickster is the whistling coyote
with borrowed coat of patches, with stolen
soup on his face; we see only his tail
as he steals all the words we ever knew.
Protecting the Burial Grounds

Womb-sopped Woman, Round Woman:
the sad and earth-stained leaves that
swallow your buckeye burdens are sterile
in grinding-hole bedrock, waylaid
into deep-sea galaxy of obsidian.

Ohlone Woman, Costanoan Woman:
with saltwater I see you
cupping the coast live oak,
waking up the soaproot shoots
to line your chin with tattooed puberty,
a woman’s badge that
from village to village
shadows your soul with
a thirst for names.

Abalone Woman, Obsidian Woman:
it’s you that’s spawned
by grasshopper hands.
I am fat and honored
before you.

[Context: this was a song of sitting before a bulldozer on an archaeological site, a sacred ground, near San Jose, California. A local Ohloné woman knew that her great-grandmother was buried there.]