

ROBYN EVERSOLE

Combing the Hair of the Pachamama

When I return to the village
 I cannot remember its words
 and the faces of friends, framed in braids
 seem strange. In my two years away
 I never dreamed this land
 in its own language.

Gregoria and Basilia sit
 with plastic bowls and combs,
 wash their hair. Wet, wavy and black
 to their waists, it glints silver-blue.
 Around them: adobe,
 a dusty hill-slope, children, sheep,
 and me on a rock
 outside the realm of conversation.

Basilia's nephew sleeps in a bright-striped cloth
 under her arm. She can't reach her hair.
 "You comb it for me,"
 she tells me, joking. But I take the comb.
 "Can you?" Basilia asks.
 "I can."
 "Can you?" Gregoria asks.
 "I can."

Though I can neither speak nor spin
 I take thick, damp hair by the handful,

work out the tangles with a clucking comb
careful not to pull, careful
until the comb finally slides through smooth
down to the ancient frayed ends dancing.

Handful by handful, while the child sleeps
and Basilia dreams toward the lake,
handful by handful, until there is nothing else
but tangles and silk, like straw to gold
clouds to moonlight, weeds to harvest.

Even the worst dark snarl
 slides out
and there is nothing to stop the comb
from stroking down through the ages
of patient backs and long, loosed hair—
the beginning point of wind—

my hand follows the comb, silent
 falling, until even the mountains
 have begun to whisper their names.