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## WRITING WELL

Poetry by [Renee Norman](#), 1999

Between Wor(l)ds

in book time

between wor(l)ds

books stacked like steps

around the architecture of her rented room

Martha does not sleep

snacks on sentences

all night long

gone is the flat line drawing of her day

the structure of the office

the symmetry of a prim supervisor

the tailored suits

on cool skin

in her nylon slip

she climbs and climbs the words

a stairway to her reformation

amazed at first light of morning

to be identical

she has not moved at all

Martha's father:

the boy-man damaged by war  
& the Englishman who emigrated  
to Southern Rhodesia  
with a Queen Anne chair

he is a heat sensor  
who reflects Martha's change in temperature  
or a veil that is drawn  
to distance confrontation

he knows the restlessness in her  
but did not question her marriage  
did not pass judgement either  
when she left the child

deep in a drug-induced sleep  
he mutters wisdom  
awake he offers nightmares

fingers that accuse  
stakes of the fallen walls  
around his body  
his mind's grasp  
of the horror he brings home to her

when she reads the first documented accounts  
of Hitler's atrocities  
it is her father's ribcage she envisions  
every bone of Adam  
another finger pointing

### Assination

he enters Martha  
as he might a room  
where the light is blinding his eyes

in the tub he draws circles on her skin  
with the soap  
laughing he tells her  
on his way to meet her  
approached and propositioned  
"i said i already have a lady"

he pushes small beds together  
holds Martha where the space between them  
forms a crevice  
a hard ridge of earth  
she feels beneath her back  
overpowering his tender hold

in this scented  
sinkhole talking  
the pronoun I rings in her ears

it is then she knows the future  
her skin round with dried white foam

### Dream Moments

Martha felt his absence keenly  
when next day  
the meeting over  
he looked at her  
stubborn, unhappy  
defiant  
a kind of unperceptive dullness  
in his eyes  
missed moments  
that's what she feared most  
from these encounters

in her dream his kiss  
so fierce  
grabbed the unresolved feeling  
between them  
crushed it in the physical act of embrace

today  
her arms empty  
like a baby torn from a loving grip  
he stood there  
only a dream away

### Through the Crib Bars

I.  
her pink cheeks  
leak through the crib bars  
asleep at last  
as if she hadn't been screaming  
that colicky high-pitched wail  
only moments ago

shadows of the rails  
fall down across her small back  
with weightless rods  
that imprison her to Martha's care  
for an instant  
Martha sees the stripes  
as lashes from a whip  
she shakes the image off  
with loathing

afraid to touch the soft skin

for fear she'll wake  
and start the cycle again  
too soon  
she dreams the baby is pliant  
molded to her ribs  
like putty  
more like the babies in the books  
with four hour schedules  
and gurgles  
not this fierce creature  
hard to hold  
impossible to cuddle

II.

she calls the baby's name  
through the leafy openings in the hedge  
a kind of lament  
whispered in the floral underworld  
but the baby doesn't respond  
already she has forgotten Martha  
forgotten the vessel

her curls are looser now  
the head upright  
she sits unaided  
fist tight around a plastic toy  
slick from saliva

Martha misses her  
more than she would have thought possible  
a pink baby from some magazine  
Martha feels pain that someone  
accomplished what she didn't

III.

the rules are that she must observe  
from a distance  
(her mother makes that clear)  
when Martha sees the child  
placed on her father's sickbed daily  
a small body curved into  
her father's emaciated thigh  
she can smell the camphor of the medicines  
hovering  
and her mother's servitude

IV.

in the photos a stranger with Martha's eyes  
glances back  
good-byes made  
years ago

For Martha's Ears Only

if she were to take shape

in my room  
i would whisper  
the only two words that fit

i am not Martha  
not a child of war  
seeking solace  
not Martha  
trapped in a loveless marriage  
or oppressed by children's petulance

yet if she rose off the pages  
swelling in novel possibilities  
i would recognize  
the limbs hers  
a composite heart transplanted  
where a person is most worthy  
of the color of her skin  
the cold ungentle parts of her  
that worded me  
and whisper:  
i understand

**Renee Norman**