

The Crow

1.

The voices of the old ones follow us,
warnings in whispers,
fear fed to us in bottles
along with our milk.

The first time alone,
we stand, terrified
and perfectly still,
in the kitchen
waiting for them to come home.

2.

From a distance, I am awed
by the prizes you wear
like a crown of flowers.
When I meet you, your face
is the glass in which I am reflected.
In your voice, I hear a shaking so deep
I expect you to fly apart.
Though our names, changed by marriage,
are anonymous, the immigrant faces
line up in our heads. We count them,
compulsively, as if they were beads.

In our ears,
a voice,
connected to us like a cord,
whispers
you aren't really very much

you guinea, you wop,
so we struggle
to blot out the sound of the crow
who sits on our shoulder and laughs,
blot out the voice
that belittles all we do,
and drives us to be best.
"My daughter,
she's ugly, but smart."

3.
I tell you
about the reading with the poet
of the beautiful hair who keeps tossing
her head back, that glorious mane,
while I huddle in my chair
and think of having to follow her,
to get up just after she sits down.
How my insides quake
and that hair,
but I get up and turn the joke
against myself before they can.
My mother tells me I'm beautiful
but I know she means inside.

4.
You know,
I know,
we know,
who always has to be best?
We are driven women,
and we'll never escape
the voices we carry within us.