

## Guadalquivir

Up in the rafters a barn owl  
snoozes in its hideaway. I'm glad  
for this guest who hunts kittens  
and mice. On the porch, mess of guano,  
cricket heads and legs, leftover from  
a bat's nocturnal feast. Last night  
dusk over the harvested oat field, I watched  
a pair of Great Horned encourage their young,  
pepper tree to sycamore, with pit stops  
in the field. Their patience  
seemed inexhaustible.

In class in another country  
Professor Brunner  
thrust his wand at me and barked, "On the map  
show the Guadalquivir." Then asked, "What illness  
is prevalent there?"  
That river, was it in Spain?

In front of my classmates. The menacing map.  
Someone whispered  
"Sleeping sickness," and I  
Grateful for stay  
of execution, repeated the words.  
Screamed Brunner, Nietzschean beard quivering  
scorn for the dullness of working girls:  
"You've had the sleeping sickness  
at school all year long!"

Then my parents forced me from school  
for the needs of ailing mother, the family business,  
three very young brothers.  
We had defected to the West, clawed  
our way to the sun—with Mother  
absorbed in her long  
communication with dying.

A quail hen, black plume curled forward  
clucks to her thimble-sized chicks.  
I shall now visit my helpmate,  
at hospital bed, talk of the past.  
When I think how I blew,  
a tuft of dandelion,  
across the continents, seascapes

and landscapes,

how I never got to know what sickness  
lingers near Guadalquivir, what people live  
in bamboo huts or straw, and  
do they cook their meals  
on open fires? I want to buy a dictionary  
and a roadmap, and then another, more detailed,  
to guide me.

That barn owl high in the loft:  
Had I not felt more than seen its pale face  
swoop past me disturbing the air  
on my cheeks  
as with the faintest of brush?

Soon all this will be memory: owls, oat field,  
these horse stalls, these rafters. My help  
mate will  
not return. What is so troubling  
about the unknown regions? What dangers  
hide in cattails of Guadalquivir?  
My helpmate  
Lies awake and quakes for me.