

# 1948

*Elaine Christensen*

*"The most important influence on any poet would be that  
poet's mother in whose body he or she first began to learn  
music . . ."*

—Sharon Olds

She was learning German that year,  
a war bride, living in Darmstadt,  
trying to say *ich* in the back of her throat,  
the guttural *r* of *Herr* and *Frau*, to introduce  
herself and her lieutenant husband,  
pursing her lips  
to form the strange vowel sounds  
of *umlaut u* and *o*,  
the difficult blends  
of *pf* in *Apfel* and *zw* in *zwei*.

Years later, when I studied German,  
these sounds surprised me, shaping  
themselves on my tongue as easily  
as a baby finds its fist and sucks.

That spring she sat long hours at the piano,  
exercising her fingers  
with Hanon first, then Mozart.  
When each finger knew its strength,  
she played Chopin. When her hands  
reached the octave with ease,  
Beethoven followed. Closing her music  
and her eyes, she'd finish  
with Rachmaninoff, her whole body  
hand-centered, each finger an emotion,  
each key its release.

The fortés, the pianissimos,  
each rallentando pulsed in me  
and I knew before I was born  
I would hunger, I would hate,  
I would fear, I would seek sorrow.

That summer as August approached  
and she grew awkward, swelling  
with the heat,  
my mother stood evenings at the window  
wishing some breath of the river  
might move in the heavy draperies,  
might ease her longing for blue mountains,  
for arched skies of home.  
Here the sky spread like a flat sheet  
from one corner of the horizon  
to the other.  
She wished for blue, anything blue.  
She said my eyes were her wish granted.

When I finally saw her mountains, the sky  
canopied like a domed cathedral,  
chips of blue glass in every window,  
I cried  
for her and for myself.  
I knew this was home,  
like an infant knows, still slick and bloody,  
to turn its head toward the sound  
of its mother's voice.