

## Self-Portrait as Burnt Offering

*Holly Welker*

The prophet says:  
I have earned a right to the voice of prophecy.  
I have suffered and seen the future  
and suffered by the seeing.

I am neither a prophet nor  
much good at making things up as I go.  
I speak in sensible tones.  
I observe the present moment.  
I record the moment's events.

I review the record and say,  
Well, I suppose that is what happened.

I've learned this about memory: the fact that  
I can't trust it doesn't mean I should foreswear it.  
The same is true of weather forecasts and prayer.

Early on I discovered an elemental preference:  
the story I shy from all water and earth,  
the one that intrigues me air and fire.

Jehovah, angry god of an angry desert, watched  
smoke ascend to heaven. In that desert  
the firstborn child had to be offered  
as a sacrifice, or a sacrifice made in its place.

The second child you got to keep.

Smoke is Jehovah's offering, water  
his weapon. He killed first by flood.

Movement starts from the center.  
Smoke ascends, water falls. In  
my desert and the desert of my forebears  
our offering to God is  
water: sweat spilled digging  
reservoirs and irrigation canals,  
the water flowing in them.  
My ancestors vowed to make the desert blossom.  
Prosperity became an offering but not a sacrifice,  
the unretainable thing God demands you keep.

The prophets of landscape say:  
our dams will outlast the water they hold.

Prophecy and history flow from the present.  
I learned history and doctrine; I was  
seared by probability and logic but  
never by prophecy and faith. My parents'  
second child, I would not be kept.  
I made myself the sacrifice to be offered for the first—  
a resentful gift, evaporating like water in the desert,  
leaving behind defiling blackness and a stench like smoke  
from the charred timbers of a fallen church,  
from a witch writhing in the stake's flames,  
from a heap of smoldering books.  
The God I was offered to can do nothing  
with me but cast me away  
and hope there is no other god to find me precious,  
who will hand me back to my family and say,  
Here, I know how to sacrifice, too.