

Vera Newsom

## MATRIARCH

The old woman in her black dress  
flowing over an egg-shaped belly  
is not widowed, merely deserted —  
a dishonourable estate.

She sits in her great chair  
gazing over a vista  
of salt creeks and inlets,  
lanes of traffic, a bridge.

She would summon him back.

Perched high on her crag  
she surveys her landscape.

He will not come.

\* \*

But his daughters!

One is the frail young woman  
with the melancholy face  
bent over the teacups,  
tendrils of brown hair curling  
in the hiss of the silver kettle;  
the other is the squat elder daughter,  
black hair streaked with silver,  
who strides in from the garden.  
She is snatching the thin bread and butter  
in spatulate fingers —

The old woman frowns.

Her long narrow nails  
close round her teacup.

\* \*

At night when the moon is high  
it sets them running  
naked in summer,  
over freshly cut grass.  
Their voices, sharp as birds,  
pierce the shadows,  
patches of white gleam through trees.

At an upstairs window  
the old woman gathers  
the power of the moon. She listens.  
Bird cries in the thicket,  
the keys at her waistband clinking  
their own jangled tune —

She smiles in the dark.

Now the ping of her bell  
the thump of her stick  
summons them back.

All night they will moan in their sleep,  
each stretched on her narrow white bed  
while the thin moon etches  
grey bars on the sheets.