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Medusa and Neptune

*She was very lovely once, the hope of many
An envious suitor, and of all her beauties
Her hair most beautiful.*

—Humphries' Ovid

The men are a diary of my days with stone:
one posed climbing from his boat,
one crouched against a boulder's shadow,
one hoisting blade. My sisters take turns looking
at what I've done, passing their one eye
like a child between them. Father,
I have trouble sleeping. Sometimes
it's the seaweed shifting along the shore or the vipers
in my hair—they glide and pull from the roots
without healing; some nights
I walk the island like a sentry
or a woman again gleaning shapes
in the waves, searching the water

for scaled hips riding the crests.
All night, I hear flight, wings rustling
like a boat scraping sand.

Before my exile, I was down by the sea searching
for anemones and picking the chamomile
that knots the path to the shore. I selected
gaping sea roses, bundling them to take
to Minerva's shrine. The light
on the water was enormous. I was praying.
I smarted with the sea so near; I smelled
the acrid salt as fingers webbed
against my neck. Something wet
pushed me down. My lip caught
the edge of the altar, and I tasted the tin of blood.
I washed beneath one wave and another.
I stared into that darkness, stammering
into its emptiness, its piteous lack of form; I
gave to it my body, my head turned towards
a fracture in the wall. I could not identify him
if he were brought before me.
But I would know the touch
of a god wet and dark
that flew straight through me
as though I were a wave or air broken into.

The flowers I had gathered scraped my wrists.
I could do nothing but look and keep on
looking at the wall, emptying myself of light.
A flicker of fire, metal sparked
against stone. When he was gone,

I tried to fold the blossoms
back onto their stems. Father, your daughter
who once drew an alabaster comb through hair
with the ease of sunlight slipping through trees
now listens to hissing that walks where she walks.
Do you know what it's like to stare
at the stone effigies of men
who have come to slay you.

When I bathe, my sisters keep watch.
I fear I will live this sea forever. Father,
I remember the pears ripening
beside the garden wall, the scent of thyme
and rosemary blurring, but it grows tiring, and how
I would mourn, for perhaps history or gods.
I am no longer even myself but what once was
a girl, back turned to the sea.

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Susan Varnot's poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, the *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Zone 3*. Work is forthcoming in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Poetry International*, *RUNES*, and *Weber Studies*. She teaches at UC Merced.