

ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

Safe Keeping

It's for your good, the guard
insists, your own good

we protect you from each other
and the world from you.

Our fingernails are filed,
hair cut like nuns'.

Who needs forks or knives
for soup and stew and bread.

As if a spoon
could not gouge eyes.

As if a handle, snapped,
would not cut veins.

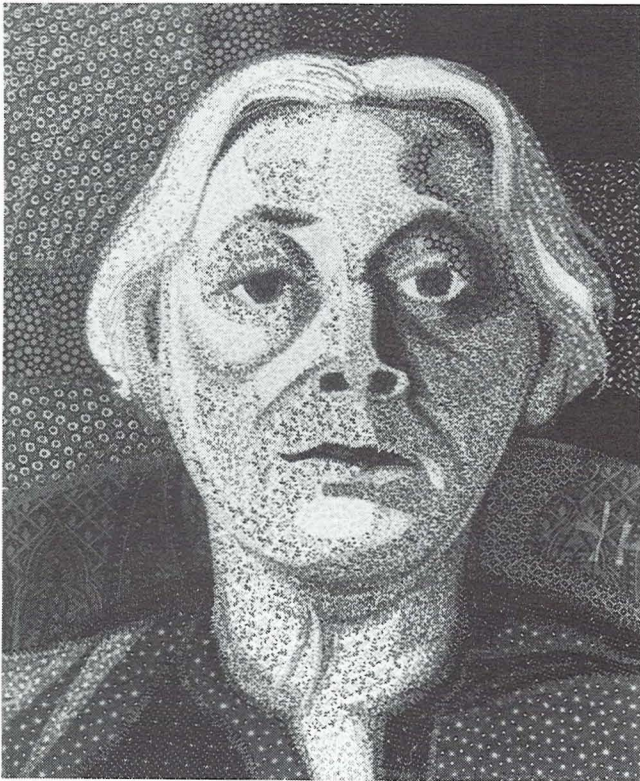


Photo: J. Baird

Deidre Scherer, *Magnitude*, 1990. Fabric and Thread. 10" x 8.5"

Defensive Measures

Chili still burns my mouth
like the twisted scythe
of peppers redder than blood
or the brick lace of the bruise
on my cheek. To kill
if you have no weapons:

maintain surprise,
find two sharp rocks,
swing them like cymbals
in a curve toward the temples—
your target will squash
like a frog.

You can also hug-break ribs,
bite the neck, shark-kiss
the throat, slice skin,
smother in mud. But here
mud is frozen in snow,
all stones removed

to landscape the entrance.
As in Aesop's cave
where creatures came
to call on the lion,
more footprints point in
than out. And I am five

feet tall, a gnarled
nanny goat of a crone
trying to fight a war.
No more guitar for a shield,
only a song for my sword.
Wait until I get outside.

Elisavietta Ritchie is a writer, editor, photographer and translator. In addition to seven collections of poetry, she has written Flying Time: Stories & Half-Stories (Signal Books, 1992).