

KATE ROGERS

The Second Tongue

I have told too many people now.
My words weave a story
which I must hold away from my body
to retell. It is about women I know
and don't know.

On the screen, in a workshop,
I saw a small girl in Africa.
Her dress was raised, legs parted
to reveal the small mouth at her centre.
An old woman, who loved her, seemed to say
a kind of blessing. Then a razor blade flashed,
like the old woman's teeth, and the girl
began to scream. Tiny, hooded (like a foreskin
they say)—
that small bud. The tip of the tongue
women keep between their legs
to speak of desire.
It is as passionate as a kiss,
innocent as a woman reading out loud,
powerful as a defiant child.

Men say that tongue talks to women too much.
But the Koran is silent on the matter.

The child unzipped my spine
pulled it loose. My womb shifted,
blood and urine leaked down my thighs.
In the bathroom, I huddled in a cubicle.
A small-voice—the child which still lives
in a corner of me—was crying. Alone and

frightened. But at six and a half, I only had
cystitis.
Just didn't understand the burning pain.

In the classroom Monday morning
I see my lovely Somali student. She is elegant
in aubergine and indigo—her grey eyes
shine from caves rimmed with kohl.
It is our last week together
before she graduates. She gives me a gift,
a green scarf—gauzy as a veil—to match my
eyes.
She is full of joy
because she can read her name on the certifi-
cate. I see
a child in her face. Recall the three sorrows
of Somali women which I have learned:

*The day of circumcision when her lips
are also excised.*

*The wedding night when her husband pushes
into that carefully sealed place.*

*The birth of her first baby when the
scar tissue tears away.*

I lay my palm against the cheek
of the child in her face. Hug her
a moment too long.

Kate Rogers teaches English as a Second Language in Toronto. Her poetry has appeared in Contemporary Verse 2, The New Quarterly, Orbis International (England), and other journals.