

## Sara Wallace

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### Small, Brown Birds

see the flaking handle of the water pump  
charred tin cans in the old fire pit  
gooseberry bramble  
black thorns against the sky orange as bittersweet  
see the roses your grandma tended red as newborn babies  
see the pine tree your grandpa shot at

pace in the spring fog because they're dead and there's nowhere you want to go  
out by the banks of the pond quiet as a stilled metronome  
not even one big rig passing on the interstate just over the hill

there they are these pulpy lumps you look past  
big as your hand the color of your shoes  
they could be dead leaves or nuggets of mud  
they could be clumps of overripe fruit

but you don't really see them until you walk under the walnut trees  
out in the far north field  
and they all lift off the twigs at once  
a billowing black cape dissipating to sky

only to all land in singular shadow  
and they chirrup that song almost under their breath at each other  
or maybe it's at you

*fly away over the water tower*  
*fly away over the silos*  
*fly away over the purple asphalt hills the blue curve of interstate*  
*fly until your tether pulls you tight*  
*until you land with grace as invisibly as we do at your own feet*

## The River

Looking at the river—  
wide, dank green and  
spiky with fallen branches,  
shadowed by neatly planted  
thickets of birch. It's early morning  
and only a small corner's lit,  
but that riffled water  
spangles up bright  
like the hips of a dancing woman  
in a short sequined dress  
beckoning me to the floor,  
as if I could put my hands  
on her sweaty shoulders  
and find something long-  
hidden in myself. I turn  
away to look at the bright  
clipped lawn across the road,  
seven hens crawling up a hill,  
a fence of tall sunflowers,  
the first small brown leaves  
of fall blowing across  
the asphalt. When I turn back  
towards the water the sun's high,  
all her body wrinkling that dress now,  
a long flank of sequins cascading  
upstream towards the bridge,  
their glimmer veiling her wrung-  
out thighs—how she'd collapse hard  
in a folding chair, reaching for her  
cherry-strewn drink, laughing  
for the DJ to cue up another,  
everyone waiting for her to name her song.  
I can almost hear the one she'll call—  
years ago I threw my head back dancing to it,  
stobes brightening the whole length of me,  
everyone in the dank room wanting me  
or at least I thought they did—  
and here I am looking for the name  
of something I used to be  
in a darkening weed-choked channel—  
restless, sad, joyous—  
autumn wind tickling my shirt.

## The Red-Leaved Tree

Today past the fire escape  
the last stubborn tree  
starts to bloom, its tiny  
leaves hook like and sharp.

*I don't think I can  
do it*, he says. Meaning  
being father in our family,  
standing on a deserted  
corner at dawn watching  
plastic bodega flags  
whippet in the wet, waiting  
for the always late bus.

The tree, lichen-covered,  
sprawls over three backyards,  
vines and moss thickening its base,  
its buds rusty as axe blades  
half-buried in fallow earth.

One yard is hardened cement,  
strung with artificial lights.

One is strewn furniture  
and mildewing towels,  
a small brown bird  
chattering on the cyclone fence.

One is all mud and dandelion,  
bright and unmown. The tree  
spreads its shade over all,  
leaves bleeding onto the ground.

## Share the Mirror

with her mother clothes shopping in town  
a skinny 8 year old girl folds herself up in a 3-way mirror

her eyes tightly closed  
she can hear the saleslady's panty hosed thighs rub outside her cage  
like a cat's tongue rasping against its newborn kitten's fur

when she opens her eyes she sees her deep blue self  
and behind her another deep blue self  
and when she presses her nose into the crack between panes  
her face's replicated thin as a knife's blade bluer and bluer

the fog of her breath disappearing her  
practicing being dead until she scares herself  
until a velour voice says share the mirror honey  
the other ladies need to see themselves

**Sara Wallace** is the author of *The Rival*, which was selected for the 2015 Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize and published by the University of Utah Press. She is also the author of *Edge*, which was selected by The Center for Book Arts Poetry Chapbook Competition. Her poetry has appeared in such publications as *Agni*, *Hanging Loose*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poetry Daily* and others. A recent finalist for a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award and the recipient of fellowships from the Virginia Center of the Creative Arts and the Millay Colony for the Arts, she currently teaches at New York University and lives in Brooklyn.