

Pretty White Child

I

Do not try to define me
at six I was a wanted child
all pretty and white, even
in second-hand clothes,

Handed down
from the skins of angels
then stretched over a body
that had been bought
for the price of a Greyhound
ticket and a bag of mangos.

But mine was a happy life
ferreting out dreams
that had been sealed
from the daylight
like a wedding dress
carefully boxed, then
slowly forgotten.

II

At ten my mother returned
instinctively pinning me to her
like the travel guides she carried
from Delaware to California
in a J.C. Penny shoebox.

III

“You’re our child,” my mother said,
and took me home so daddy
could beat his love into me
until I learned to smile

Or pretended,
I did.

After a while I began
to crawl under my bed
and hide in the darkness
until daddy calmed down.

Imagine
what eating dust and dog hairs
tasted like going down
the back of my throat.

IV

Now you
say I have done quite well
for spending my childhood under a bed.
You remind me that my legs
have unwrapped themselves
and carry me to the grocery store
like everyone else.

The marvelous thing
is you don’t notice
the thick dust that settles
on the ground whenever I stand up.

Billie Travalini