

## Gail Thomas

### Inventory

When your first pet, Starlene the white rabbit, died,  
I trudged through two feet of snow to shovel a spot  
in the garden, hacking frozen ground.  
How could I dig deep enough?

When your father and I were falling apart, you won  
her in an egg hunt. I couldn't refuse, though I knew  
you and your sister would soon flee with me  
to a second- floor apartment in another state.  
Star stayed behind, guilt dogging me  
like a noon shadow in a gunslinger's duel.  
So much stayed behind. The inventory  
startled me awake each morning:  
job, daycare, rent, lawyer.

That first summer I drove you silent and sucking  
your thumb to see your father and Star.  
Next year we rented a place with a yard  
where Star visited to doze in the shade  
of a red wheelbarrow. Once we drove off,  
forgetting she was loose. Later we found her  
sprawled like an earth goddess in the same spot.  
I counted the ways she could have been  
run off or gobbled up. She left again

until we moved to a ramshackle cottage  
on a country road that turned mean  
in winter, a permanent, if wind-blown  
home where Star could stay. We built a hutch,  
you changed the straw, filled the water bottle,  
held and released her into the lettuce and peas.  
That January in the vet's white chamber,  
alone with strange hands and smells, she died  
without your goodbye.

Now that you are a mother, do you remember  
how you stroked her innocent fur,  
the final stiff trick of her body? Now  
you know the way a mother rises and fails,  
the way light reflects like a barb or jewel  
in your children's eyes.

You watched the hole grow slowly, arranged  
lettuce for a journey you never imagined,  
threw clods of icy dirt, then ran away,  
sobs wracking your small chest.  
The sun was setting in pastel splinters  
on the other side  
of the frozen mound.

**Gail Thomas'** books are *Odd Mercy*, *Waving Back*, *No Simple Wilderness*, and *Finding the Bear*. Her poems have been widely published in journals and anthologies including *CALYX*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *North American Review* and *Mom Egg Review*. Among her awards are the Charlotte Mew Prize from Headmistress Press for *Odd Mercy*, the Narrative Poetry Prize from *Naugatuck River Review* and the Massachusetts Center for the Book's "Must Read" for *Waving Back*. Thomas teaches for the Pioneer Valley Writers' Workshops and has been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony and Ucross.