

The leather lap was smooth as moss
Where lay the little corpse across
The prophet's knees. And camel hair
Made cradle for the toddler there
While pagan relatives stood by
The mother's arm and wondered why
Elijah wept.

The widow's son,
Her only child, had just begun
To love the quiet man who spent
His days in prayer, and sometimes went
For weeks alone among the hills
And mountains, where the silent rills
Flow west to Zarephath — or used
To flow, before the drought had bruised
Phoenician fields and left its brown
And barren wounds along the crown
Of Lebanon. The little boy
Had once let slip excessive joy
And said, "Do you think you could stay

And be my daddy here?" And they
Now wondered why he wept? And why
The sun had set and western sky
Turned crimson while Elijah pressed
A foreign child against his breast?
But even if they knew that there
Was love . . . that lonely prophets care,
With leather skins and camel hair . . .
That underneath, the losses tear
As deeply as a father's grief —
But even if there was belief,
They would not know what had been pent
Up in this many layered lament.
Three times he had composed the verse,
And every time the pain was worse.
And now his memory combined
Them all and drummed against his mind:

A prophet suffers from the truth
And miracles he made.
And dies while he is still a youth,

From prayers that he has prayed.
A prophet suffers from the truth
And miracles he made.
And dies while he is still a youth,
From prayers that he has prayed.
Round and round his mind the verse
Rolled heavy like a deadly curse . . .

**Is not the hope of sinners dashed
And those who spurn the Lord?
Why is a faithful prophet slashed
By wielding Yahweh's sword?
He closed his eyes against the tears
And thought back over all the years
That he had kept himself from wrong,
And day and night had sung the song
Of David, that his heart would be
As pure as snow. And suddenly
God's word had sounded in the plains
Of Gilead, against the stains
Of Ahab king of Israel:**

"Elijah, man of God, go tell
The king there shall be neither dew
Nor rain until you give the cue.
How can the king of Israel
Take to his bed a Jezebel
From Sidon with her feeble Baal,
And dig a fountain that will fail?
Think you my spring of Life is out,
O king? Then you will have your drought!"

And so Elijah gave the word.
And his reward? The prayer was heard,
And Ahab drove him out, to hide
With neither food nor drink beside
The brook of Cherith. There he sat
Alone, afraid, and murmured at
The price of faithful prophecy:
"What does it profit here to speak
The truth and die beside a creek?"
But then God said, "You will not die.
Consider how the ravens fly:

Are they not free at my command
To go and come from Ahab's land,
And carry here bread, meat and all
Through windows in the castle wall?
And will I not then care for you?
Consider now what I can do:
Henceforth I make of your distress
A banquet in the wilderness."

And so the prophet's murmurings
Were quieted with raven wings . . .
Until the brook went dry. And then
Elijah groaned, "O Lord, how can
A prophet die from prayers he prayed
And miracles that he has made?
At your command I shut the skies,
And now the thirsty prophet dies?"

"You will not die," the Lord replied,
"But go to Zarephath and hide.
And find a widow there like you,
Who waits to die. She's not a Jew,

She has an only son in need,
And oil enough and meal to feed
The boy and her one time and die.
Now go, and like a raven fly
To Zarephath, and there you three
Will live on what you cannot see."

And so the prophet's murmurings
Were quieted, with unseen things . . .
Until the boy lay dead upon
Elijah's lap, the only son
He might have had. "What have I done
For this, O man of God? Is one
More raven ready now?" she said,
"And can it carry to the dead
Live souls when they are gone, and bring
Back life and make a mother sing?"
The words were not as harsh as might
Have been. She saw the gathering night
Around his face and knew that he
Had felt the loss as much as she.

When everyone had gone, she heard
Him whispering: "Why bear the word?
A prophet suffers from the truth,
A prophet holds a lifeless youth.
How short the life for which I prayed
And brief the miracle I made."

**And now a third time God replies,
"Elijah, tell me, is it wise
To think that every raven died,
And every jar of oil has dried,
And every time you hit the wall
Your God is tottering to fall?
O man of God, go up and pray."**

Elijah took the child and lay
Three times across the corpse and prayed
All night: "O Lord, this child you've made;
Have mercy now and give his breath
Again, and spare the widow death
On death. And pity me tonight."

And when Mt. Hermon let the light
Of dawn shine through the upper room,
It had become a second womb.
Elijah took the breathing boy
Alive, and folded him with joy
Into his mother's robe, and took
A long, long walk to think, and look
Out on the western sea, and weep
That he is loved and still could reap
Such hope when everywhere is drought
Without, and worse within: his doubt.

Elijah, come and let your light
Shine here in candle one,
For though it flicker low at night,
It rises like the sun.

And though the darkness and the dearth
May threaten life and light,
Remember God still rules the earth,
And ravens fly at night.