

Leaving home

She'd have liked it here
in spite of the floods in autumn:

that long valley that used to be filled
with bamboo, grasses, young almond trees,

olive groves on red alluvial soil,
all were washed away in a single night

and piled on the flat rocks below
the forty feet of the little waterfall –

a thick torrent then, an opaque Niagara.
The hill above the farm broke loose

and the retaining wall collapsed in a slurry
of orange clay, stones, dead animals,

till we feared for the house itself with the endless rain.
It took the men from the village a full two weeks

to set it up stone after stone:
it was block and tackle and the six of them

streaming with sweat in the winter air.
Those rocks were the weight of an ox.

You'd think nothing short of the end
of the world could have brought them down.

But the strokes began to take her away.
In the end we found her a Home.

I think of her hard Northumbrian life –
one of thirteen, eleven alive,

all of them farmers like her, sheep on the hills,
the trees by the barn covered in small hard apples,

none of these plastic sacks
and rusting wire and chemical fertilisers.

It was clean black clothes on a Sunday
and church and reading aloud from a serious book

under the oil lamp, till the young were asleep
in front of the fire and the boys were hungry

for more than an apple, beginning to scrap
till sent outside to clean the boots

ready for work the next day: more mud,
more sheep, stone walls, the dogs.

There's nothing to be done.
No mending what's gone in the brain.

Though I'd like her to know what I'm doing now,
over here, with my own farm, and the sun on these dry
hills,

rosemary, thyme underfoot, and my hens
giving eggs with yolks like sunshine.

In the spring we'll replant.
Olives and almonds of course.

The figs come wild. Maybe
an apple or two, when I find the spot.