

# Why I Learned the Trade

Sarah Pemberton Strong

It's not about the money, he'd say, folding cash  
into his wallet. I didn't believe him.  
Come on, just once, just try it, he kept nagging  
as if plumbing were sex, until to shut him up I said  
Yes. I called in sick, went with him to a strange  
part of the city.

On the cracked cement floor of a garage near the  
freeway  
he put a torch in my hands. Like this, he said, and  
the whistle of gas  
roared in my ears, the flame burst out and I my  
God turned  
metal into molten silk and back again. Don't  
touch it now, he said, but I burned  
my fingers on that line of brightness  
as if it were a sweet I could pop in my mouth, the  
copper  
burnished violet-red and blue-green where I'd kept  
the flame too long, the shining drop of solder  
beaded  
on the joint like icing at the bottom of a spoon.

As I walked home, men raised their heads and  
stared  
as if I'd called their names. Bottles in the gutter  
gazed up  
at me, even the cigarette butts had eyes. I had  
become a goddess, my body decked  
in steel-toed boots and dirty overalls, it wasn't the  
money.

All that first night my fingers cracked sparks: burst  
dam meets downed electric wire. Power flooded  
    through me  
like sex in dreams, like joy, I twisted  
the sheets with it—copper, fire, water, lead;  
my skin, my blood, I was all elements.