

*Claire Malroux*  
Grottoes

I

Without knowing us the dog rushes to greet us  
from the path at the morning's most luscious moment when the sky  
leans on the church's slate roof

Imperiously she leads us to the enchanted spots  
of her dog's life

We must roll with here in the fields sniff the horse-pads  
shake ourselves off in the stream which erases time's borders  
like animal tracks

A bridge to our human joy so close  
to her domain  
and necessary to her happiness  
as if a hint of eternity guided her by its smell

When we retrace our steps she'll hurl herself on us again  
with grand gestures of gratitude

Swallows have no such fraternities  
Barely curious, the horses will have turned away to cratch themselves  
and embrace, cheek to cheek

Echo of the group gathered on a rocky promontory by the ancestor's eye  
not so long ago at the heart of the grotto

## II

At the grotto's mouth she forgot the spring  
the grass's whispers the stridences the shiver and thunder  
of the branches

shook off the sun's weight to penetrate its silence

Now she is no more than an arm of shadow a snake's sloughed skin  
in the stone

Men have crawled into her body with torches  
and flints

Europa Eurydice Persephone Beatrice

Their drawings destroy and beget themselves  
horse's belly bison's hump and mammoth's chest  
doe's head in a crotch

One reads: the god is closest to me in my enemy  
With my sharpened lump of clay I hold him in my power  
I am embodied in him  
Or: you who pass by here help me to escape the stone trap

Some unique artist has left a signature: human  
slender, sexless, future pastor of the catacombs

Another, is it the same, big-buttocked female carrying  
her clitoris in front of her like a Perigourdine her bag  
when she goes to market on the village square  
at the hour when the sun gnaws the last bones of snow

III

Alone in her grotto where nothing except a rarer air asks questions

The branches up there grinding the dead on their way to a cloud-eden

Rarer matter than dew on a rose, shadow on a wall, the shiver  
of skin stretched over the chasm

For the hermit the days' exhalations the leaves' prodigality the greenness of rain

What is a day after so many days?

A stone (sometimes white), a marker placed graciously but without indulgence on the  
path

Oh mask the dusks, fire off huge bouquets of dawns

Let your afternoons play at rolling down the slopes  
as yesterday you slid your days on the shaft of the abacus  
back and forth, without counting them

Where today they are impaled one by one in slow torture

*Translated by Marilyn Hacker*