

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

All the Unknown Names

by Steve Brown

1.

Washing the Corpse

After Rilke

Netted from the dark-green brackish waters
of the Seine, this wordless bony slab.
All names wash off – and here's what's left:
a mute grey flesh, now dumbled to thumbprints.

The attendants have grown used to her.
In thin lamplight, sponges move with a restless
intimate caress she has not known
since her mother clutched up that small bunch
of pain, and called it trouble.

What calling had hung around her? Whether Mary
or Martha, or whatever – seemed irrelevant
to the pressings of their vinegar-rinsed sponge.
No pause for contemplation, ever,
for all their practiced hands. Nothing now to guess.

She had already passed into the night's great sky
framed in the high uncurtained window.
She had been content to let all names go
- apart from that, perhaps, that she might spring to
when she came into her empty paradise.

2.

Amongst the Inoyu....

Amongst the Inoyu, there is a custom:
with the newborn, a strip is carved
from off the soft flesh of the inner thigh,
and written on it, in a black and curving script,
the most secret name of all.

Rolled into a small cowrie shell, hung
round the neck, that name will bob
through the whole of life unread:
a kind of silent commentary.

At the last, with the eyes'
grey horizons closing down,
the shell is broken and the name read out:
this is whom you should have been,
the unnamed you had always been,
secretly but truly, falling short of.