Lexicon

The language in my mouth
Comes from academies I would never
As a girl, have been allowed to enter,
In centuries when no one in my family
Knew how to read.
It comes from coffee houses in London
When the craving for caffeine
Changed the map of the world,
A craving around which empires
Were erected or dismantled.
It comes from clubs and reading rooms,
Libraries and halls,
The lexicon is like the small fork of a river
That over time mixed with the family pool
And turned us from dark to fair,
As the family itself, over time,
Learned to untwist the dam ropes
Of the ruler's language,
So even now a book of philosophy
Is floating somewhere in Poland
Years after my great uncle wrote it
And years after he was loaded with the others
Onto a train and on some winter midnight
Was hauled out from under the worn blanket of sleep,
Was dragged to a field and shot,
The blood pulled like a handkerchief
From his breast pocket,
The warmth of it melting a small section of snow.
In my mouth is the figs in syrup
Drizzled with cream of the officers' meal,
And the whole bird carved into
And the sage-scented steam it releases.
In my mouth is the black blood of a Jew
Dying on his knees,
Is the bread a woman stuffs into the cavity
Of her mouth while clearing the table
After the generals have gone off to smoke.
In my mouth is the knotted silk
A man slips between his lover's teeth
To muffle the sorrowful orchestra of pleasure.

Jacqueline L Berger