

## Saying Goodbye

Those summer nights  
he lay at the window,  
chin cupped in his hand,  
and watched the stars go out,  
the only one awake,  
when even the bars  
were closed, knowing then  
how it was to be.

His friends refused to  
understand, and merely  
repeated his words,  
"inoperable, chemotherapy,"  
hopefully, beneath the slow  
irregular rhythm of the fan.

Down the street  
a screen door slammed.  
His wife leaned her head  
against his knees.  
They tried again to tell us  
what we did not want to hear.

Later they brought  
slices of lemon pound cake  
on clear glass plates  
and iced tea with mint, and  
he talked of going  
to the Texas State Fair  
in the year he had left.

And after they had said  
everything they could,  
we sat on the floor,  
our knees almost touching,  
between us a half bushel  
of lima beans to shell.

## Still Birth

As if I had actually died in that dream and  
woke up dead in a garden in late summer  
where a child was swinging  
in the shade of a weeping willow.  
Across the lawn another child  
chanted the roses' names: King's  
Ransom, Crimson Glory, Sheer Bliss,  
while a woman wheeled her chair  
among the beds and tilted her face  
toward the sun.

As if that garden were real, the path  
wide and smooth before it  
narrowed and took unexpected turns,  
and where there had been roses suddenly  
were ferns and mosses. Hosta dark and  
striped, pale blooms on slender  
stalks upraised against the sky.  
Shadows of tangled vines beneath  
a canopy of leaves.

As if for three seasons I had not  
carried the weight of her life in mine  
and had not seen bare branches blossoming  
after a long winter, and had not heard  
migrating Canadas returning to green waters.  
As if I had never known the one who  
grew for a time beneath my heart  
kicking and turning in her watery world,  
who was delivered into silence  
one spring day.

## These Empty Fields

I am letting these empty fields in mid-December  
stand for all the places I have traveled through,  
the men I might have loved, the women  
I could have been, with the sun slanting across  
the stubble of last year's crops, dried seed pods  
rattling in the wind. I am letting the branches  
against the sky and the spaces between the branches  
stand for all the time we never had.

## Fear

Long after the light has moved  
across her bedroom wall and out  
into the night, years after the stationmaster  
has pocketed his watch and turned away,  
she can still hear the dogs howling  
behind her house and across the fields  
at night, just before the fast freight  
rounds the bend and her windows  
rattle her awake, sensing disaster—  
a pick-up truck stalled at the unmarked  
crossing, a loose rail, something  
abandoned in the shadows along  
the tracks, her father driving home  
drunk after a late night of cards.

## Coming Home

i

Christmas day, driving into thick fog  
among black cedars that appear  
briefly, then dissolve around us.  
Near the edges, fringes of fog like gauze  
curtains moving across the trees, lifting  
momentarily. A ribbon of brighter fog  
floats like silk above the plowed fields and  
weaves among the trees. In the distance,  
wispy gray branches brush against the  
sky's pink scalp. As soft colors dissolve,  
I doze in the moving car, the highway  
humming beneath my feet, then wake  
to a clear black sky and piercing stars.

ii

While we slept, night hardened into crystals  
that stung our fingertips as we moved hands  
along the metal rail that led from our room  
down the wire mesh steps to the parking lot  
where a few cars glistened in the morning sun.  
Later, driving through Illinois on I-64  
past places called Burnt Prairie and Grayville,  
beneath a thin, cornflower blue sky,  
a haze of trees circling the open fields,  
something glinting in deep furrows,  
quartz veins against black earth, icy pools  
between plowed rows. We cross the narrow  
Black River, and the road curves around the few  
isolated hills. A cow stretches her neck toward  
distant fields. A pick-up truck has stopped  
beside a pond. White smoke rises from the trees.

iii

After miles of dead grasses and leafless trees,  
we come across a few startling green fields. A flock  
of small birds descending. Near the fence row  
two trees grown so close they have become  
a single tree, each branching out on the side  
farthest away. There is no separating their roots,

deeply tangled beneath the earth.

iv

An hour from home, fingers of fog curl among the upper branches, smooth the soft gray backs of hills, slip among the trees. The road narrows, following the curve of the land, and we begin a slow descent to the river valley, the sky reduced to a wedge of gray between the hills, rain on the river, then open fields again and black rail fences marking off irregular hill-shaped pastures. We drive beneath a canopy of branches, following limestone walls built by Irish masons a hundred years ago.

v

My mother's living room is dark and quiet, lit only by a table lamp and the colored lights of the Christmas tree in the corner. The walls hold paintings done by former students in shades of green and blue, abstract seascapes and clouds, a footbridge over rushing waters. A rocking chair with arms carved into dark swans glides through this room. An angel rises out of a single piece of wood, her face pale and featureless, her arms lifted and held slightly back, revealing the hollow blackened space between her wings.

vi

Late afternoon, I walk along streets named Pocahontas, Shoshoni, Hiawatha, Mojave, past tidy yards and neat brick houses where yellow lights are coming on in windows facing the street. Two men lean against a truck and smoke, while girls jump on a trampoline behind a house. A young couple strolls down the middle of the blacktopped street, holding hands. The houses here are smaller than memory, one-story brick with contrasting shutters, modest Christmas trees in front windows, red ribbons on the doors.

Even those places I went with my lover  
now seem formal and quiet, and not  
part of my past at all. The evergreens  
tower over the eaves like childish drawings of  
Christmas trees taped to the windows at school.  
By the time I turn back, night is moving in  
over the farm beyond the last houses,  
roaming through back yards and  
along the empty streets.

vii

Two days after Christmas, fog has frozen  
on all the trees, encasing branches and twigs.  
We enter through a door that has been wired  
to notify the nurses if the old ones  
try to leave to buy milk for their long-grown  
children. We walk past the visiting room with its  
red floral couches, upholstered in plastic,  
past angels made of linen handkerchiefs  
fluttering among dark branches while  
larger angels robed in silver guard the red  
poinsettias. Along the hall, we read names  
of shop-owners and teachers from another  
time. The one we have come to see  
is inching his wheeled chair forward  
with his toes, singing under his breath,  
"Just Molly and me and baby makes three."

viii

Near campus on an overcast day,  
we head east on Clayton, following the path  
I used to walk the year I was thirteen,  
past the empty lot where our house once stood,  
past the Nazarene Church where my best friend  
sang "How Great Thou Art" in a breathy soprano  
while I played piano, where the youth group  
played games in the basement after  
Bible study. Then down a couple blocks and  
left on Avondale, where my friend once  
whispered that it was wrong for girls  
to beat a boy at any game. Another left turn  
and we are heading west on Jackson Street,

where I am suddenly eight years old, playing  
beneath the evergreen in secret rooms  
where the dark branches touch the ground  
in my grandmother's yard, or roller skating  
over rough brick sidewalks and tree roots  
to the corner store to get bread for sandwiches.

Just past the college football field, we park  
in the circle drive before Pauline Hall,  
where mother's new office is located,  
the same building where her father lived  
in the nineteen twenties, where fifty years later I sat  
in philosophy class, debating what was real,  
while Dr. Gragg stood on his desk, swatting  
at wasps that flew in the tall, narrow windows.  
My mother uses her master key to let us into  
offices, classrooms, seminar rooms. We walk  
the length of the building, talking about  
how it used to be. When it is time to leave, she  
leads us out a different door than we entered,  
hoping the superstitions aren't true.