

## Helping David Finish the Move

The doberman across the way, vocal cords cut  
can't stop barking. He rasps and squeaks.  
A Mustang with extra wide radials squeals  
onto the lot, hits a hard u-turn, throws out  
a tsumani of gravel and dust. I tuck my head  
cover mouth and nose, think of my mother

who can't get one full breath any time, her lungs  
have so shrunk, until the ventilator forces air  
through the hose in her throat. Fourteen years ago  
the surgeon performing the first tracheostomy  
nicked one of her vocal cords. Everything she said  
she whispered. She couldn't laugh. Since the second  
operation she holds a small microphone against her throat  
mouths her words, low-pitched, robotic.

That dog is committed to its obsession.

I check my watch, wonder if I should worry  
when the red Civic Hal willed him cruises in  
David beaming behind the wheel. He says  
he's tired, another death watch, another friend  
slipping over. His own symptoms are mild  
night sweats and thrush. He's lost ten pounds  
but not to worry, he's eating well.

Inside the two-room warehouse studio  
David shows me what stays and what goes.  
I trudge in and out with boxes of books  
and records, a sewing machine, odds and ends  
of someone else's life.

When my mother tried  
to kill herself she swallowed sixty-five  
Seconal. They pumped her stomach but nothing  
of the drug remained. She shouldn't have lived.  
She cried and cried.

Some afternoons, suffocated  
by pain I cannot name, unable to cry, I walk the path  
at Waterfront Park, watch wind whip the Bay into waves  
that shatter against the rocks, spraying me with brine.  
Far out, one windsurfer skims the whitecaps.

[no stanza break]

I imagine the force he expends balancing upright  
the ache in his hands, calves. My nerves  
thin staying with him.

That barking dog calls me back.

David steps outside, locks the door behind him.  
After eight years under corrugated ceilings arching  
wall to wall, one room pink, the other sky-blue  
how will he contain everything in a downtown  
studio apartment? His small teeth gleam, the word  
*necessity* floats in the air between us, like the music  
he composes, weaving desire and rage; the patience  
he brings to each dying man, full body hugs until  
the last light; the joy passing through them.

For the moment I'm at my mother's side  
who can't live, who won't die, whom I cling to  
and push away. Then I'm here with David  
embracing good-bye in the dark. *Necessity*  
I answer, taking the word in my mouth  
a pebble to loosen my tongue.

## After She Died

I went into the bedroom where she lay still  
on her back on the floor, one arm flung out  
as if to say something important, as if to say  
*welcome*. Kneeling beside her, fearing to see fear  
I peeled the blanket back slowly from her face.

Eyes closed. Cheeks and nostrils dark.  
Mouth a black line. Rocking in the filtered  
morning light, I stroked her hair, choked  
on anybody's words: Mother. Love. Remember.  
Thinking as I touched her, cold as death.

Afraid to hold her hand, afraid of *stiff as a corpse*  
I molded my hand to her shoulder, began to croon  
a made-up song, the words broken and flowing:

*Mama, come back, Mama, listen, I want to tell you  
Mama, the story you told me of how you danced  
in thin air under starlight of Taos mountains  
young and smooth your green eyes as you were  
shining before marriage, hungry children, empty  
years collapsed into one shallow breath.*

When I heard this wish to undo my own life  
I woke, cramped and separate. Kissed her cheek  
covered her face. Slid my palms along all  
the curves of her body. Tucking her in.

## The Company of Ghosts

### *i. Yearning*

Riding a train along the sluggish Hudson  
into colder weather, thicker mist of ice and rain  
I clear the glass with my fingertips, strain to see  
beyond the near shore. Half-concealed

in flurries twisted by wind, the ghosts of my dead  
drift above the river. I'm tired from the midnight flight  
fatigued by caffeine, and turn, impatient  
from hallucination. But every time I lift my eyes

there they are, wind passing through them  
mother, grandmother, the friend who killed himself  
at twenty-one. I press my ear to the glass  
to hear what they are saying.

They do not want to return to their lives  
do not beckon me to join them. All their yearning  
is to live once more on my breath.  
Like a dutiful child I become

the warm tongue saying their names.  
They sweep forward like dancers taking a bow.  
The train slows into a station. In death as in life  
the boy I do not name turns away.

*ii. Impact*

I try coaxing my mother into the train.  
No matter how sweetly I speak, she will not  
free herself from the company of ghosts.

I promise not to hold her; I want only to know  
is she happy. I offer reminiscence, news of those  
she left behind, children, grandchildren

a few devoted friends. My breath clouds the glass.  
Nothing suffices. Grief and the jogging of the train  
rock me to a kind of sleep where I dream she is

languorous as silk, glows, gliding, silent  
through tall light trees diffuse, to a room  
without walls where the poet is singing her life.

It's all there, every beating, every kiss, the hours  
at the barre, the yards of tulle her mother's needle  
gathered at her waist, summers in the mountains

riding bareback like a boy. She freezes when we get  
to the part about the scar on her back  
rough as the crater an asteroid

streaks toward. The impact crashes  
me awake, alone on a train rocketing north.

*iii. Confession*

I knew my friend was planning to inject  
ether into a vein. Foolproof. Once the cold liquid  
entered his blood, nothing could stop  
his heart from stopping  
not if the ambulance had already been called  
not if a doctor stood waiting.

Looking back

I understand it was his heart he could not live with  
the way it leapt in the presence of men  
and danced in his chest and would not be still.

His mother found his corpse. A perfect set-up:  
no note, no clues but false clues pointing toward  
*accidental overdose*, a conclusion the coroner  
signed off on, his parents, the priest.

.  
After the service I told one friend what I knew.  
He scoffed. *Everyone knows that boy  
loved to get high.*

Dear friend, can you hear me?

Now I can say what I couldn't  
the autumn afternoon you whispered *the foolproof plan*  
in the stacks of the public library:

I love women.

Would that confession have saved you?

The train rocks on. I see your face pale in gloom:  
long dark hair, too-large nose, too-gentle mouth.

Not your eyes which were always cast down.

*iv. Guilt*

Whatever I was busy with the last time  
she called seemed important.  
I was tenderly brusque?

Yes. And I let her down  
almost as often as she asked for help.  
At the estate sale, my sister and I

priced her things cheaply.  
Now strangers sit at the round table  
where she sat reading novels

working the crossword.  
Her plate-glass view: cast iron railing  
pink geraniums, patches of sky.

All that summer, unable to leave her apartment  
she was so wistful asking  
*is it a beautiful day?*

Did it hurt that I never lied?  
The air was sweet often, the bay stretched blue  
mysterious as an infant's eye.

Oh, that last day I was so busy with nothing.

Did she cry, after I hung up?  
I see her trailing tubes through silent rooms  
wheezing ghost of her own life.

The storm surges across the river,  
batters the pane, writhes  
across my face.

*v. A never-ending line*  
Further back in the gloom  
half-dissolved ancestors

sway in gusting wind  
grands, great-grands

great-great-grands  
all the way back to

Belfast, Bavaria  
the Olduvai Gorge

They jostle for attention  
voices mingled

in one long moan  
They are the sources of

one another's joy and grief  
sending them down a river

that winds for millions of years  
I recognize my eyes

the tilt of my chin  
chittering beat of my heart

I am their greatest achievement  
their vessel and sediment

I am headed their way  
but not before I've had my turn

I pull down the shade  
take out a pen



## Dying to Reach You

Dear frugal mother, shabby in slippers ten winters worn  
if you were living I'd call every night, New York to California  
collect. Worried I wouldn't repay you, you'd hesitate  
but how can a woman tethered to tubes and a ventilator  
hope to stay close except to pick up and say *yes*?

I'm having a wonderful time. If you could get to the phone  
I'd tell you about the ice on Lake Christina melting under sunlight.  
Even to complain about the broken computer would soothe me  
just to hear you say *oh, Christie, I'm sorry*. Just to hear you ask  
*will it cost a lot?* It's been four months, some days I don't think much

about what I miss, but this morning you feel as close as the ache  
in my jaw. In the dream, you exclaimed *I'm happy now, why  
can't you let me go?* I thought this meant your love was dead  
and went outside in the icy dawn, down to the lake to see  
the edges refrozen, reeds trapped. I know they'll thaw again

but who is left to tell me when to step out, when to hold back,  
and when to walk away? If I thought it would help I'd fling myself in,  
sink into mud, eyes open, looking for you. I trudge to the pay phone  
and call information just to say your name out loud, just to  
throw my voice down an empty line, dying to reach you.