

## ASBESTOS

Mom, Aunt Liz, and I reach the end  
of the dirt road leading from a relative's  
cabin to the highway where our car is  
parked. They refuse to get in immediately  
because the car has trapped July heat.  
We fling car doors open and remain  
outside. They are absorbed in conversation.  
I sight something on the gravel berm  
that looks dead. At least it's not pulsating.  
It's the color and shape of a gray mouse.  
Moving closer, it becomes asbestos.  
I can already see them shudder as I  
burn with perversity. Carefully I  
pick it up with two fingers the way I  
would a real mouse. I turn and walk  
in their direction. When they see what  
I carry, they scream, and their faces go  
white. Backing away, they plead for me  
to stop. When they step back, I step forward.  
It's a menacing dance, and I'm the threatening  
leader, mocking their fear with "You guys  
are afraid of a piece of asbestos!"  
At first they're not convinced, voices  
bordering on out and out screams. Soon,  
they become angry and insist that I drop it,  
which I do, but not without kicking it  
toward them. They jump back, look at it,  
hesitant to acknowledge their overreaction,  
but relieved. The teasing child in me  
gets in, closes the car door and waits  
to receive his finger-wagging reprimand.

## PAINTING A NOVEMBER MOOD PIECE

It is a cold train rail in winter,  
on a near coatless day in mid-November.  
My body refuses to move far from  
a blanket, and sky is a snow field  
waiting to happen. When I open the door  
a riot of leaves whirl at my feet. Birds  
are scarce, and trees tremble a network  
of twigs. Sun has abandoned the world  
outside my window. A uniform bleakness  
becomes the landscape where shrieking  
geese reverberate.

I lean over my desk, press pen to paper.  
Wind announces itself outside the widow  
whipping bare branches. There is a lulling  
effect to my loneliness. Preferable  
to a crush of people, I choose the fragility  
empty rooms. Face over the legal pad,  
words for a poem slip to the printed line.

Satisfied, I walk through the house, look  
down basement steps, listen for unusual  
sounds. The furnace clicks on like a soothing  
ballad. I sit in an overstuffed chair reading,  
eyes heavy with the sweetness of sleep.  
Wind flicks leaves against the windows.  
Finally there is no conspicuous choice  
but to lean back, close my eyes.

## THE ACT OF LEAVING

The unmistakable end of an affair,  
when you carry your heart away  
from the wreck, appears slow as a sunrise  
one morning when you lift the blind and look  
out the window at good-bye. You think  
of black moments that made no sense.

She entered your life delicate as a  
hand-painted saint, a ceramic representation  
of innocence. Soon afterward, clay began  
to crack, glaze discolored, and you studied  
the real surface to find a lifelong habit  
of substance abuse. You watched her slowly  
rip her existence to shreds of ruined paper.

She huddled in the corner of excuses,  
her brow heavy with frowns when you leaned  
on her for truth. She inhabited a world  
of door to door crime, holding hands behind  
your back with homeboy miscreants.

Every day you moved ahead of her  
devious machinations, her hobbled  
together explanations until you hauled  
presumptions and lies into the light.

At the window you let sun lock you in  
its orange stare, the flaming room an exit  
from a mismatch.

## THE STREETCAR

Mom and I shuffled onto the streetcar,  
stomped snow from our shoes, and took seats.  
I befogged the window with my breath.  
When the streetcar began to move, I heard  
the heavy sound of steel wheels on steel track.  
Cold had entered with us, but Mom made  
me wear a wool scarf that scratched my neck.  
Our shoes were damp, and my pants cuffs wet  
from unshoveled snow.

A short ways down the street we heard  
an electrical popping noise. The car  
stopped dead as stone, and the conductor  
folded back doors and stepped into the street.  
From the rear window I watched him maneuver  
the pole, trying to reattach the cable  
to the overhead wire. A hiss of orange  
sparks flew from his effort until the trolley  
reconnected and collected current.  
The conductor reboarded, and we began  
to roll along the rails again.

I saw sidewalks with people slipping,  
sliding, and squeezing out steps, but no adventure  
during the winter of '48 matched the moment  
when the trolley detached and the conductor  
and I strained our necks to see the flash  
and flare of electricity.

## NIGHT HYMN

A prostitute saunters back and forth under a streetlight, takes permission from the night to be there. She poses, walks a few steps, poses again. She is a beginner, barely able to smooth out her movements.

A car pulls to a stop. She bends to its window. She makes a nothing-doing head motion, and the car drives away.

Watching the street as if she were at the seashore looking for shells, she seems nervous as the devil in church, draws back against a brick building. She seems calmer when she steps from shadow, trimmed in a slant of light.

Another car waves her over. She crosses to it, hears his words, and opens the door.

He has black eyebrows that hood his eyes, a longish face, a blurred jawline that prevents him from being completely handsome.

They drive to the reservoir and park. She's not scared until his hand smothers her mouth. Her eyes freeze. He drags her into a stand of trees. The boning knife slices into her body like a bird through moonlight. For a long time, her ribcage bleeds the same song. He is a messenger delivering his package to the night.

Pulling away from the parking lot, he heads back to the city, thinking of the future and of the day someone will die.