

REGRET

Always she was so well put together,
Silk dresses—later nylon and polyester,
In accordance with the times she lived in, but
Always always a bright bird, an exotic
Among the gulls and pigeons of her winter and summer homes.
And finally, husband gone, just Florida
With her retinue of snow birds all around her
Magnetic then as ever, except to me.

In the old family portrait she sits ankles crossed
In silk, in the sheen of her dress,
A curious look on her face, a pleasure
So alert and uneasy it is almost pain,
Her dark eyes seeing beyond the four of us.
I stood next to her, posed in my silk dress, too,
Patent leather Mary Janes, white socks,
With a look of my father about me, straight nose,
Blond hair, while hers was dark.
I didn't show the camera's eye a trace
Of what I felt, how I would almost have bloodied her
For being so perfect, so relentless a judge
While I was so far below her, mired in blue jeans
And dirty knees, hems that showed, a titless chest
And worst of all tears, so many tears, a rank and depthless misery.
I thought my father a god, a movie star—

He did have an air about him and a sharp wit
And delighted laugh, and I thought her in the way.
She blocked the way to him;
She was static to the music he and I could create
When we weren't even trying.
He seemed my only relief, though never quite my savior.

Fifty years after the picture, my father
Long gone and hard-mourned,
She lay dying, her bright eyes dulled,
Her plumage frayed. I tended her
So vigilantly, feeling such a pull of love
And also that old dislike—was it really hate?
That after five weeks, little sleep or food, I cracked apart.
“I'll pray for you, Mommy,” I said, putting my face right up to hers,
an agnostic since I was ten, and so was she.
“Will you pray for me?”

“Oh, yes I will, my darling, beautiful girl!”
(I was 60, and they were about to drag me to a mental ward.) I wept.
So she had forgiven me, it seemed, and loved me after all.
All those headaches I gave her as a teenager,
All those furious things I said, with my father's sharp tongue.
Getting even for all her critiques.
Drawing blood and tears, hers this time.
But now I trembled to feel such love even if it was cracked and crazed.

And later in a frenzy of order
I went through all my papers and letters,
Throwing out 30 bags of them, but coming upon one letter

(from her!) I got my senior year of college when my boyfriend had died—
I had forgotten she wrote me such a letter.
I read, “You are my brave and sweet girl, and I love you,”
And I knelt on that cold basement floor and wept
For what we might have had, what I *did* have without knowing it,
Young and blind and deaf to you as I was
Nor could it have been helped.