

On days you can't remember

On days you can't remember who she was,
you disinter the pictures (you don't want to!),
then focus on benign peripheries,
so that the first contritenesses that haunt you

will show themselves banal: 'whatever happened
to that armoire?' 'That dishwasher broke down.'
'I miss the velvet couch.' 'I wish we hadn't
let the thistle overrun the lawn.'

Entice your vision toward more pointed hints:
Salute the crib, the changing table. Welcome
a glimpse of diaper bag. Recall its scents
of disinfectant, sour milk, and talcum.

You deftly sidestep 'what's she thinking here?'
and 'does she know it's me behind the camera?'—
yet trip on 'why such tangles in her hair?'
and 'did we never change from our pajamas?'

Retreat beneath the quilt her grandma made.
Review the popup book, rewind the mobile.
Respin the top, recoil within the bed.
Renurse, resing, resigh, relaugh, rebabble.

And, should you need to, build a sturdy house
of quatrain stacked on quatrain. Window-free
at last, live lyrically, your mind diffuse—
all squinting rhymes and harmless frippery.

Go, dear one. Pile words one upon another.
Form thick iambic castles, if you wish.
You have the right, love—you who were her mother—
to veil what life remains in artifice.

Sixty

I've learned by now: I'm every age at once—
not in memory merely, but in form,
like Russian nesting dolls with just the latest
mother breathing out. Or like a tree
with sixty rings, so that even my seedling
start remains, swaddled by its future
matrioshki; comprising, still, the marvels
of its quick, brave year in the sun.

With winter nearing

With winter nearing, I remember spring:
A fickle March, before my mother died.
Her bed lay flush with window. Side by side,
We watched another snowfall—wondering

At all the forms a snowflake takes: like bone
Turned ash, like milkweed floss, like feather.
Tonight they fell in tufts that clung together,
But for a few who braved the fall alone.

Heavy, wet, yet floating. It was night,
The storm lit from beneath. (My mother's room
Was lucky, disconcerting midnight gloom
By posing, drapes pulled wide, above the light

That advertised the doors below, where hearse
And ambulance were meant to go.) We watched
The snow in halogenic awe untouched,
Unbroken now, by dietician, nurse,

Aide, hospice worker, laundress, orderly—
Their squeaking soles no longer restless hounds
That whined and sniffed at daylit doors; their rounds
Unspooled at last. And so we lay there free.

We lay there, clumped and clinging, and we felt
That we might never die, but only melt.

Mendicant

Your house is the plainest of churches. Yet
how like a nun I find home there. I tiptoe so
the wood absorbs my step, so that your ceiling,
heaven-high, won't broadcast echoes

of my graceless gait. Rough wooden beams
arrogate all dreaming here. Logs huddle
tight against the empty hearth. Likewise,
the daylight, muffled and oblique, worms

through pointed arch windows fortified
by iron traceries. Your halls: made slim
by dusty breveries stacked flush along
their borders. Narrow, too: your bed.

Yet what cosseted relief I find inside
this counterworld submerged in sepia. An old
clock strikes its hollow hour, somewhere,
in a distant room I seek to leave unfound.

A simple, impossible thing

1

A memory that breaks my fall: the mid-winter night we climbed the mountain tower, and Maggie, in her scarf that matched her lipstick, in her nimblest sneakers, hoisted her blithe body onto a parapet, so naturally I thought why-not, began my own uppity fumble. Yes, but then you held my shoulders firmly, downly, laughed and said, Oh, no, you don't.

2

You who cage such raucous grace beneath your ribs that even its chastened, muted flutter flies me back to the ways I felt around my babies, once. Rolling together in the bay-windowed room, one end of a saggy-baggy bed to the other, goofy-giggly, basking in the sun's *noblesse oblige* approval of our basking in the sun. You make me ache (but sweetly—how?) for my little girls. As they did, once (those days cut short by random knife), you invite me, for a visit, back to Eden.

3

The sort of sentence that will surely remain true of us: “From opposite sides of the crowded room, they sent each other smiles of mutual encouragement.” Note the cool authority, dear: third-person, all-knowing. From all our endings onward, is this the bland but kindly way they'll speak of us? (It's fine by me.) And should I not, then, delegate each fable I've got left to that omniscient third-woman? Assuming I could catch her in the corner of my eye, then pilfer her quintessence for myself. It's a maze, you (don't) know: this fissure lit merely by cavewoman's torch. This life of the unreliable narrator. (Sudden English-major wish: if only I were Huck Finn, and wise beyond my knowing!)

4

You might, moreover, note how I grow tired—or, no, how I long to grow tired—of picking at the threads of these vagaries, these half-concocted memories and clues. Not just the strands that lead to you—though you've reason to suspect they all lead there, I know—but others too, spreading out like (let's say) jellyfish tendrils across a mandalic sea. How deeply, how finally I want to have already found words for all I seem so dumbly bent on saying. Then,

afterward, to lay my self down in that haven of quiet that coincides, uncannily, with the warm hollow between your chest and collarbone, that nest I settled into on that first night and have never yet flown far from. Forever my mind rests there in times of near-asleep or near-awake. You remain my accidental respite from that double-edged hope: Either to lose all need to write or speak, or to luck into the miracle of saying it all, just once, and plainly, and then to let it go, absolved at last of everything but love.