

Peoria, Illinois

In the soft hotel bed
I count breaths,
touch my stomach;
sleep is mean
and unreflective.

In the morning
you hold me, press
my palms like I am
strong enough for this.

In a small room I wait
with girls who share
stories like candy.
Quiet and hungry,
I wonder if you go to lunch:
what you would eat?

It is late when they
call my name
and I am thinking
I have to do this
so we can be
the way we were,
unchanged;
the way we are,
unchanged.

I lie on my back,
the nurse gently
spreading my legs,
"Breathe easy," she says,
"This is not the time for tears,"
but it is, I want to tell her,
it is a time for tears.

October

Somewhere in central Florida
my father lies buried, and with him
a fair part of my changing heart,
milling restless in the soil
of that hot state, its crab-
grass and sand so unlike Pittsburgh--
leaves ripe with the will
to fall and scatter, an appointed
season for leather and death.

If I could, I would bring him home,
back to the chill morning
that hoisted him up telephone poles
as a Bell lineman, hovering in a harness
above the street, leaning against
the sky like a casual visitor. He knew
which wires to cut, where to find
a weak connection.

Beneath the body of an old Plymouth
he lay, slim and angular with scoured
blue eyes, skin rugged and worn as he worked.
I fell in love with the damp garage air,
the smell of oil, the backward silence
of the October night claiming its place
between my breath and the concrete floor.

Dressed in pajamas and without prayers,
I held the caged lantern light
so he could see, his knuckles
chapped and scraped
as he forced a piece of metal
into place and waved me closer,
greased the base of the thing
that would make the car run.
Then lighting a cigarette and wiping
the grease from his hands,
he slipped the denim jacket
over my shoulders, wandered off
to a warmer place.

Gravel

I walk mincingly
from the carport
to the porch,
skin coarse with salt
and other sediment
I carry with me,
the August night
ripe with warm
tomatoes.

Single, I tread,
my arms full,
resting one bag
on my knee,
steadying the other
in the crook
of my elbow.
Peaches and corn
shift and buckle
as I search
for my keys,
like this,
never thinking
to put the bags
down or to make
another trip.
on Saturday
I meet friends
for coffee. Our life
is still a slumber party
in many ways--
telling secrets
of misguided love
and equally misguided
fingers and tongues;
laughing till we are weak
with struggling to be good,
till will we cry because we
might never be good.
Still, we are comfortable
to be women, to be
smart; the edge
of our catastrophes
we use to feed

each other hope,
to dance.

Who else, I wonder,
could know this,
could place a finger
on the heart without
flinching from the very
beat of the thing?