

THE THRIFT SHOP DRESSES

I slid the white louvers shut so I could stand in your closet
a little while among the throng of flowered dresses
you hadn't worn in years, and touch the creases
on each of their sleeves that smelled of forgiveness
and even though you would still be alive a few more days
I knew they were ready to let themselves be
packed into liquor store boxes simply
because you had asked that of them,
and dropped at the door of the Salvation Army
without having noticed me
wrapping my arms around so many at once
that one slipped a big padded shoulder off of its hanger
as if to return the embrace.

SHELTER

It was only a joke: her two big sisters
mailing the note to her they had managed to type
on their father's Remington Rand, saying
the Russians are going to bomb
your bedroom today, signed "The Russians"
and telling her she would be safe
if she took off her clothes and went to the attic
alone with no food or juice
just Davey, her stuffed cocker spaniel,
and hid all day in the crease of the folded cot;
so she and the toy dog stayed in that hot, woody dark,
the blue ticked mattress and springs holding them close
like a cloth-and-wire angel, the feathery moths
sipping the sweat on her neck and toes.
When they sounded the all-clear triangle
they had snuck home from the first-grade
orchestra, and stamped up the slivery stairs
loud as police, she cried, but only a little, glad
that the Russians had had a change
of heart, and dropped the bomb
next door, killing just the McLaughlins'
poor noisy parakeet, that they
were her sisters, only her sisters,
who loved her, and that she could smell
the hot shepherd's pie from the kitchen
as they gave her back her white undies
and tee-shirt and corduroy overalls,
as they helped her braid her hair.

TO THE FLOWERING PLUM TREE ON BEACON STREET

And here you are
outside the Sovereign Bank

in the night-blown rain, old now; almost unable
to grip your million blossoms,

bride whose groom, spring after blustery spring,
doesn't show up;

what can you do
but stand there, idly fashion one more

sapwood ring of your own, and keep on
sighing

SIXTY

When my foremothers' bureaus
have cluttered themselves

with the outsized brooches
that clawed the hearts of sweaters

long since given away,
when my hair cannot keep

from telling its raspy testament
to the whole of the winter air,

when starlight has come to know
for all its dimes' worth of weightlessness

that it can do nothing,
and not even quiet is simple,

then let me lift the sack cloth
from every mirror and draw close

and take pity on each of
my neck's old erogenous furrows,

then, merely because
the dutiful, matronly sun has come back,

let me fling wide the door
on the boisterous garden of death.

PRAYER FOR MY SISTER

May you rise from the earth as a mulberry tree
in spring, a little away from the cabin road,

may the eager wings of your leaves
shiver daintily in the warming snowlight,

may your strife be redeemed as a vixen
free of her rusted trap, limping home
to her hungry kits,

and your dread of God
as a storm cloud heavy with yes,

and your fine, tired hair
as the slim-throated calls of the peepers
at evening,

and your last travail
as the papery buds that flee from April's gusts,

and your regret as the grief-black fruit
whose sugared inks brighten the beaks
of the fledgling crows,

and the pain that tore your bones
as sunlight calm on the moss-crowned rocks,

and your death as the syllable of mist
on a doe's mouth

at daybreak, safe
from even the weak sun's aim.