

Trade

Daddy is driving the red car
which is the color of worry,
on the Garden State Parkway
when the front tire blows.
The car fights but he wrestles it
to the side of the road.
We bump to rest
like an apple under the trees.

I am bored
but hopeful, as though we are going
somewhere more important
than Howard Johnson's for dinner
after visiting another
stranger he knows well.
But the evening begins
to feel full of misery
as though we are done
with the pretense of a family
for another day.

He lies down
on his back across the front seat,
his feet on the ground
as if to take a nap. As usual
he wears his gray wool trousers,
black Ban Lon and silk
socks, the shoes I've shined
until they were perfect
but now I see the scuff of a cloud
in their toes. My brother and I
stand stiffly beside our mother,
dutiful and beleaguered,
before the open trunk.
A stranger stops to help us.
He raises the car with one arm
and while it tips to the side
we all stand

in the shadow of the trees.

My stepfather comes forward
to give the man a gift, a box
of what he sells
to make his living: gherkin pickles
in dusty bottles, warty green
with vinegar, the rind
of watermelon, cloudy as the sea;
sweet potatoes swimming
in amber syrup, and cocktail mixes
without the booze. For the holidays
yet to come
glassy maraschino cherries
too sweet to eat,
bloodshot
cocktail onions
and a handshake.
The tools of his trade.

This Little Piggy

He was biggest, headstrong, headed for
a ham; next stayed home, tall and lean
and maybe, as toes go, handsome
as a salesman or a doctor, like my uncles.

One was fattened on roast beef, another,
his equal if a little
bent and fated to be calloused,
had none. There was I, the one she loved

most, the one she treated to a smile
and a wriggle, wrung between her fingers
till I rang with a gleeful peal.
Whether I was good or bad

or if I went to bed at seven on a summer evening
when the ringleader of a TV circus
said it was time
for all good boys and girls to go to bed

didn't matter; though I tiptoed
to listen from the bathroom floor,
the beast below awoke.
First a low rumble

stirred the air. In the dark
I could hear the turning wheels of the house
as it tumbled toward market. Then her voice
would free itself, like laughter

but more a whinny in fear
of fire. He called to her
but she did not answer, called
and called, until he was roaring *Hoor,*

hoor, hoor, as if he couldn't find her
hiding in the corner. Then
the whole house shook