

## TRAVELING THROUGH THE PRAIRIES, I THINK OF MY FATHER'S VOICE

How we must have seemed like twins over the phone,  
my father speaking with my voice, I speaking with his.  
Some strange accident of genetics or the unchecked influence

of mockingbirds and mimeographs. I have heard two trains sound  
almost alike till they passed, like the one last night bending westward,  
the other slowing to a halt, the earth shuddering in the dark between,

while the stars held their place overhead, a thousand points of tin and fire.  
Had it been day, I might have seen to the far faded edge of nowhere  
or whatever town lies wakeless there. Here, the wind sounds the same

blown from any direction, full of dust, pollen, the deep toll of church bells  
rung for mass, weddings, deaths. Coming through on the straight road,  
the land seems especially bare this year, although the fields are still green

with new stalks of wheat, rye, canola. Someone has been taking down  
the grain elevators one by one, striking their weathered wooden frames  
from the skyline, leaving only small metal bins. The way the disease

took him by degrees, the body jettisoning what it could: his arms and legs,  
his grin, his laugh, his voice. In the end, only his eyes — their steel doors  
opening and closing while the storm rattled within — and his breath,

the body's voice, repeating the only name it knew sigh after sigh,  
a lullaby sung to a restless child on a heaving deck, a hush we only learn  
in the quiet dark long after the boat has gone and the waves have ceased.

## KITE FLYING

Late summer, when the winds blew hard,  
I would blend into the sand, while my father stood  
at the edge of the beach watching the kite rise  
against the dark pines, and the line which tethered it  
to his hands, became invisible in the half-light of dusk.

How it pulled heavenward into the insubstantial blue,  
or circled twisting in the breeze, falling then rising again,  
always beyond reach. And he would stand gesturing,  
as if calling a stray dog home or a cat from a tree. A secret spell,  
something only he knew to waken the creature in the sky,  
to send it running out to sea like an angry pike on a line, then return  
exhausted to his hand. And when winds struck, it could seem  
as if the whole kite would burst with longing to leave the earth.

What an old song this is — what flies above our heads  
like a banner, a wish for the one who never comes home.

She was all skin  
on the bathroom floor  
dreaming of blood.

*Sorry, she said to the darkening blue  
deepening around the drain.*

*Sorry we can't go on.*

## THE MORTICIAN'S BOOKKEEPER

You arrive early to work,  
clothed in a careful black  
which you peel off layer by layer,  
till white-sleeved and tieless  
you descend into the stacks,  
crunch numbers until the sun  
slips out through the back door.

When things are slow, you too  
might slip into a crowd of strangers,  
fill an otherwise empty room,  
or watch a casket burn in the brick oven.  
Sometimes you help the dead dress,  
comb back a loose hair, close an eye,  
add color to their drying lips.

Some are so light, you could lift them  
with a hand placed under the neck,  
another arm stretched out to gather  
the body at the knees, and walk  
like a mother with a sleepless child  
in a slow circle by the window light,  
or the way a man with calloused hands  
might carry his new bride up a long dark flight of stairs.

## HERMIT

How the world is full of silence  
you say to yourself, closing the door  
behind you as you slip back into your cell  
like a ghost or a letter returned unopened,  
its words unweighed, unknown. A cloud  
before rain, before storm. A bottled wish  
in a sea of grey with nowhere to go.

You stand next to the gas stove  
listening to the steady *click-click*  
of sparks in the empty space  
trying to set the invisible  
afame. And when it catches fire at last,  
you watch it rush outward as if mad,  
driven by a hunger for air, for something  
to say to the dark and metallic world.

## TO THE STREET MUSICIAN

What rattles at the bottom of the voice  
raised against the cold is not a question of grace,  
nor an echo of storms burning in a street lamp's glare.

Some nights, all you have are fingers  
and old wood  
blending steel and voice  
down an electric line to the heart,

How you hold this six-stringed mystery close to your chest  
unlock hands from neck, let the hollow frame fill,  
an old vessel of words burning slowly down.

All night you travel in the ears  
of women in empty cars passing  
in the dark, wondering to themselves:

*How far is it to home? How far to the narrow bed,  
the open window, the quartered moon sinking  
like a hand across the fretted sky?*