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,
it's 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
 aflame. 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?