

Catechism

I don't remember them taking you away,
but I remember your absence.
as when a stone is lifted off a toe,
or a tooth falls out and you tongue
the bloody hole, curious that you never noticed
how salty and tender that particular
geography could be.

“Stop following me!” you had turned on me
that face, the pupils black and wide, alien,
a mask or enraged doll, something
out of the *Twilight Zone*. But I could not stop:
mine was a holy vigil, the whole
of my seven year old's passion
funneled into keeping you near.

We watched the *Sinking of the Titanic*,
and I remember the panic rising
off your skin as the decks tilted,
the trapped figures screaming,
how your breathing grew
quick and shallow.

Then you were gone. Really gone.
I must have been at school
when they took you away.
The wool plaid skirt stuck to
my legs on the long trudge home:
I was careful not to step on a crack,
not to break your back,
that day as always, sending my anxious
incantations on, only to push open
the door and find
an old lady with a canary.

My catechism betrayed me. Yet I climbed
the knobby apple tree,
made ant cities in the sandbox,
watched American Bandstand on the new TV.
I learned the Twist. But at night
shadows grew, the voices:
when would you be back?
why did you go?
who was at fault—for there was always fault,

sins, cardinal and venal,
and I was at the age of reason.

Mother,
will you absolve me now,
will you lift this stone from
my heart, will you
let me quit this vigil?
For I am tired of carrying you
through the night. Mother,
come home whole, teach me
a new
catechism.