

Catechism

I don't remember them taking you away,
but I remember your absence,
as when a rock 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 turned to face
your 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*,
the panic rising off your skin
as the decks tilted, the trapped
figures screaming,
your breathing growing
quick and shallow.

Then you were gone. Really gone.
I was at school when they took you away.
The plaid wool 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
not you, but a wizened 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.