

All Autumn

The voices nestle and lean in, protective.
 Summer's last full trees dip like fronds over the brick pathway.
 We pass and duck, talking.
 The fire station clangs the city's mythic heart.

"We lived on a street beginning with K.
 There was a fire station alongside and the old quad.
 Your father and I walked there almost every night, peering
 Up at the brass pole. Sometimes the bell began to ring
 And the men came dropping down.
 Or we would just lie there
 And listen."

The days crouch into their cold sunsets,
 Draped behind the row of commuter cars,
 Bumper to bumper on the avenue.
 A boastful oak rubs this window to distraction.
 Couples stroll, heads down and with briefcases
 As winter hones its edge.
 I am thinking of a girl
 Who may have been a character in a book I'd read,
 Coming up by train with suitcases and enough anguish
 For an entire blushing week-end.
 She is the desire
 Of that tree, those couples, autumn.

"A friend of your father's told us
 About a cemetery where the famous writers were buried.
 I started going up there every afternoon
 And walking among the graves.
 I remember a picnic by Henry James' tomb in October.
 It was dark and just getting cold. We all went off in pairs.
 We were such lovers."

Houselights snap on, then headlights,
 And the stores clatter shut. Like cattle,
 A few last joggers lope reluctantly into town.
 The breeze that stirs the crisp leaves
 And papers off the cobblestones nudges my envy
 Of such undistinguishable home lives, father at an oak table,
 The smell of rugs when you press down close.

Though I would wander in the fields all autumn,
 Challenging the wind as it draws the leaves
 And flings them against old graves,
 I want to come home again,
 Not to houses on wealthy streets,
 But to you, Mother, I would come to you.
 Often I go to meet trains alone,
 Watch each stranger disembark, embrace.
 I explore the city at its emptiest, stray
 Down to the bridge where young Quentin Compson
 Wrapped his ankles in lead and sank.
 The white-iron dusk is my description
 Of how desperately we want to love,
 When the assiduous husband is not enough,
 Waiting as he does, at home,
 When there are trains coming in and the days relax
 In this dreaded, end-of-a-sunset world.