

Live Oaks

These nerve-end trees hung over us with a dread
 whose musings were a thousand layers deep,
 a billion pursed leaves sucking in dioxides
 while Spanish moss, hung in corkscrewing strands
 repeated lies. All lies. Still we walked here
 most nights, down the red brick path
 that promised a fairy tale under the trees
 if we listened hard enough, told us night
 was a slowly turning page, and day was a drunk
 crashed out on the other side, in Bell Park, belly up
 to a drift of roses, car exhaust, McDonald's fries,
 that was how the oak trees saw our lives.
 Promised there'd be trouble all along the way,
 parcelled out by these houses, castles really,
 wedding cake balconies with iron froth,
 strident day lilies, electric fences, a doberman
 with a bark like a tomahawk nipping at our heels.
 In that house a witch lived — see the tower,
 salmon-pink adobe, where she let down her pitch-black hair,
 but no one climbed at midnight, no one . . .
 see where the dogs with eyes as big as millstones
 lunged at the ornamental wishing well
 a drunk crawled into with his bottle, crooning to it.
 And in the gutter, islanded with newspaper and kleenex
 are the burnt matchsticks and crumpled cigarettes
 the little Match Girl lit one night and held
 against the bottoms of her feet, until the cops arrived
 and hauled her off. Somebody's version of heaven
 must be drawing us out at night, or maybe what draws us
 is the way trees don't belong to any lament
 or any graciousness dripping from the leaves.
 The windows lit our eyes. We walked at night
 to see into our other lives, a table set for twelve

in one unblinking shameless picture window.
 A steaming goose leapt off a platter, a knife
 was buried in its back. And if we *didn't* see this happen,
 neither did we expect to imagine a thing like this —
 what, in the Southern way, they call *thanksgivin'*,
 stressing it the way they stress *umbrella*, *insurance*,
 putting the urgency at the front of the word,
umbrella, *insurance*, words held over us like thanks.
 Thanks for steering the flashing cop car past us,
 thanks for tucking us in like silverware folded in linen napkins.
 Someone wealthy was born here, someone wealthy will die,
 but let harm fly so high above these oaks tonight
 it can't see down through leaves . . . and so stars flowered
 down in some poorer garden wilting in the dark
 between those wealthy lives and ours. It's easy now
 to blame those houses for everything even they would never have.
 So one rich woman sees me walking fast and calls out
your walk looks like it's going somewhere,
 another woman swings open the mirrored cabinet door
 of her misery and moans at me
oh lady, please come here, my teeth hurt BAD
 and grinds them back and forth like china plates.
 And in her sour vestibule death is not a voice
 on the other end of a princess telephone,
 death is not crumpled tissues, death is not even a row of stars
 in a phonebook beside a list of doctors' names.
 She doesn't die that night inside her house,
 it doesn't matter what the windows want to see —
 the ones across the street that stare so hungrily
 into her brimming windows; even I am a window
 squinting back as I pick up the phone and dial
 and a doctoring voice says too familiarly
oh yes. That's Mrs. Herb. Let me talk to her.
 And then, her terror mute inside my voice,
 he adds, *she does this all the time. Just say*
you have to be getting home now. She'll be fine —
 his weary porchlight voice that shines at me
 through cobweb filaments and dead black wings.
 I wondered how the story would find its way
 out of that house that didn't seem to live
 in any neighborhood but its own dirt-poor treeless dark.

Live oak is a hard and durable wood.
Bless us, keep us, we said to the corrugations of bark.
Leave us be, to the thunderstorm foliage.
Why did they listen with only half an ear?
What did we curse with our thanks everlasting?
Above the *ped-walk* bridge on 59
I can still remember buckshot stars and the heavy clouds
blown inland from the Gulf of Mexico,
sucking up marsh gas and the flutterings of a cattle egret
along the way. I can smell the ocean air
and feel the half-hearted tricklings of the waves
towed in the wake of stars and clouds
departing Galveston, where sand is spotted with oil
and anyone who walks there barefoot
sooner or later feels the cold black stuff
squirt like a gritty mustard between the toes.
Three friends who used to go walking here
I've lost. And every time
death scrubbed them off the skin like squamous cells
until they *weren't*, and blackness everywhere.
But afterwards, looking back, the red brick path, the frizzy moss
escaped like strands of hair, the rippling branches,
everything, everything seems shocked to life
at the end of all twisting and turning, burnt alive at the tips
as if an errant root had lanced a wire
deep underground. Death belongs to some other story.
This one ends by night, and night is a trestle table
with a silver cloth and wistful moons for plates,
laid for twelve though not one single guest arrives —
only the Match Girl, walking under the trees again
holding a bundle of matchsticks in her arms.
And as the night brings blackness leaf by leaf
she lights the wick of every blessed oak
then lets them burn as one great tree.