

Apparitions

When my father died, my mother kept saying
he was in the hospital sick. Hours later,
after admitting he was dead, she moved
her clothes from their bedroom to a hall closet.
She slept on the couch, crying herself to sleep.

They put his body in the dignified blue suit he seldom wore.
He put little value on formality and even less on ceremony.

An unpredictable man, moving abruptly between charming,
easy-going joking and sudden quick rages.

The body in the coffin bore no evidence of the motility
that had made him so difficult when he was alive.
The rage was gone, so was the charm.

Before they closed the coffin, my mother put two white roses
on her husband's chest. She slowly touched his cheek and lips.
The palm of her hand covered his nose and mouth
as if checking one last time to make sure he wasn't breathing.

Surely, his dead hand laid heavy on us.
After he died, bartenders and gamblers showed up
wanting money he owed them. The legal aid attorney
called it "unenforceable debt." Yes, yes, yes, she knew that.
What was she to do, a widow with children?
Defy men who'd think nothing of throwing acid at her or
doing evil to a child? She needed help negotiating with vultures.
The legal aid attorney didn't even begin to understand.
She was alone, mortgaged to her own folly.
That whole marriage set her back.
Like her mother said it would.

My mother said his problem was he believed
he could charm his way through the world.
Instead people took advantage of his desire to be liked.

As he learned he couldn't trust anybody for sure,
he grew afraid of the world, and she intoned,
"A man who's always living in fear makes big mistakes."
A man like that, if he's got a family,
they're down in the hole with him.

A man can't worry about whether people like him or not,
she said, a man's first responsibility is to his family.
He knows people worm themselves into each other's hearts
only to eat them. He stands a guardian at the gate,
firm against vultures, hawks, sharks, and clowns alike.

Maybe they could have worked it out,
but when he died, there was no longer any need
to make anything work.

When they met they went out dancing every night.
She loved being in motion, always a step ahead.
Maroon nails, emerald gloves almost to her elbows,
a black, flared dress that flew out as she twirled,
arms extended and chin lifted up, reaching, reaching,
swirling, swallowed into the crowd, transfigured,
moving in synch across a dance floor.

My father's fingers fumble as he pins a carnation onto her dress,
then he lights her a cigarette. My mother's hands
caress her husband's cheek. Light surrounds their heads,
a light of joy at seeing each other.

The other day, my father's ghost walked beside me,
shoulder to shoulder. Once a man of many words, his ghost is
silent. Sighs, hard breathing, working to keep pace, being dead
his lungs just aren't what they used to be.

Anxieties are the food of the spirits watching over us.
Your foolish ways preserve the spirits of fathers, mothers,
their parents before them, a chain stretching back to a time
no one alive can imagine. Keep the blood working hard,
your dead will awaken. My father's spirit feeling my fears
quicken in mysterious recall of endocrine flows.
We communicated in codes triggering reflexes not images.

Have we known each other? Has there been a gift? Did
this intrusion restore my force of will and the ghosts'
hope they can help? That their will, echoing
inside the hearts of the living, will, as the priests promise,
resurrect no matter if a dark angel flipped off the switch,
no matter if individual force of will vanished into nowhere?
Are they playing hide and seek within the place inside me
that has no use for the repetitive triviality of everyday routines?

Back to simple
reflexes that might get me home safe, back to security,
back to predictability, back to orderliness and organization, back to ...