

The Fates (as my mother saw them)

On her eighteenth birthday she packed her things
She left her parents' home
She moved she said not even one mile
To her grandmother's house

She stayed there for six months
She moved to the city
She enrolled in beauty college
She met some girlfriends

The pattern to these stories:
"I met" "I moved in" "I moved on"
No move was far
But someone learned she was not in charge
Strange, it was always a "she" in these tales

"The mother, say what you want about men, she is always the biggest problem"

A generalization like this was always safe
Spoken with a sly laugh
If she seemed unable to stay put
Inside was unchanging determination

"I was always, I was always ..."

A phrase repeated never finished,
Words halted
Her eyes did not stop moving
Palpable anger flowed into the silence

"It's not worth talking about. My mother used to say the way I behaved,
I must think I was a princess. She had no idea what the problem was."

She moved from one place to another
Suddenly acting on a need to put whatever behind her
The child changed everything. It is the children
Who make life so terrifying. They are said to be blessings
On your life, but she knew better. If a man or a job turned bad
You moved on. You didn't need to stick it through.
Children form a cobweb that the fates weave
To entangle you in their schemes. They wrap you up
And suck you dry. Did she mean the fates or the children?
Maybe the fates were the old women she read about
Somewhere ceaselessly winding and unwinding
Spools of thread to keep busy. Maybe the fates were
Muddy-eyed newborns.

My mother let motion replace emotion.
With the light sweat of a good workout.
It worked until she reached her nineties.
Confined at home, her thoughts returned to the ranch
Where she grew up. They crossed the bridge built
After she left, they went north on the interstate that replaced
Old Bayshore highway, they looked for the first exit past
The county line, they raced up the hill to the cemetery that lay
Just to the west of her family's ranch, and coming to the crest
Of an oak and madrone covered hill, she entered rolling
Woodlands where cattle roamed. Deeper in the hills, she wandered
Scrubby canyons punctuated by cattle trails and a few dirt roads.

The cows are running again. When she was little, twice
Brittle hot winds blowing in from the interior spooked
The animals and something mysterious caused them to riot.
Whenever she described the scene, they always run headlong fast,
Jumping over ditches, some falling and breaking their legs,
The rest moving faster and faster
Escaping a fear deep inside them.

The men jump on their horses and fly away after the cattle.
She wants to follow the cowboys. She wants to fly out
Of her father's fingers as he throws his commands
Forward over the land.

But her mother's hands hold her in place.
She has her own horse now and rides fast
With the men chasing the cows.
She charges ahead of everyone, leaving the cowboys behind her.
She catches up with the racing cattle
She pulls out in front of them.
Everyone is behind her.
They see her figure dwindling away, until
All that remains of her presence is a tall cloud of dust.