

PAPA

Christmas 1980

As usual, you haven't come to meet me
at the airport with the others.
Yet when we arrive home
you rush out from the house.
"Susie," you say,
and kiss me, unafraid,
holding me long
around and beneath my shoulders.

So I come to you in the morning.
Come out in the cold morning's sweet fog to the memory of hay
baled and stacked in the lean-to shack.
And you have lost your grim impatience
allow my fumbling bare fingers and short strength
to work beside you
loading them on the pick-up truck.
When it's full,
we get inside and begin the drive
to the field.

You open the first fence.
I offer at the second.
"No," you say, "there is a certain way
I want to shut it."
"I'll do this one," I say,
at the third and last.
You hesitate. "Okay."
You drive the truck through
then I climb in again
and shut the door back tight.

Out in the field the cows flow
to us in a lumbering
until they're close around the glass,
shouldering.
"Better wait to get out," you say,
"until after the first bale's thrown.
They're pretty feisty."
I'm not afraid of them as I once was;
yet, I wait.

The third bale I pull down myself;
hustle it against my thighs to a place
even with the others,
and thomp it down.
Take the twine through my thumbs
and levered against my knees,
unbind one side,
then the other,
and the whole bale's unbound.

Cows come up now, in their thick breath.
I strew the loaf
in sections in a long line.
It's so they don't stand in it,
you've explained, and shit.
Then you take one bale and I the other,
you carrying the farthest,
I the nearest,
until they are all in the line
and the cows like a necklace
around the long strewn throat of hay.

We walk behind them.
You point out one about to calve
and another newborn you think a dwarf.
You count 99; I, 101.
"That bunching threw me off," you nod,
and I agree.
We stand awhile in the wind.
I listen to their steady chewing,
dry, gummed.

The market's gone down to two-thirds of what it was,"
you say, speaking to me man to man.
"Been warmer the last few years.
It's unseasonably mild for this time of year."
"Yes," I reply. "I think some shift is happening
in the weather all over."

In a while
we move back to the truck,
climb in, and drive out
from the field.
You close the fence.
We walk across the muddy road towards the house
and there in the yard

you draw out your pocketknife
to whittle the soft mud
from the bottoms of your shoes
bending down in your solitary grace
wiping the blade in sure strokes
on the white fence.
I watch you, admiring
your careful pace
so much slower than my own.

"Now, how 'bout yours," you say.
You open your hand
and I hold up my foot for you to see.
"These cleats sure do get jammed."
"Yes, Papa."

"Here," you say.
You take my foot in your hand.
I can feel your fingers through my wool sock
and around my ankle, over the bone,
firmly, gently,
and the knife scraping scraping
the mud lodged on the soles.

"There," you say, when it's finished.
"You're okay."
You set my foot down
and we go on into the house
with the others.