

Granting the Wolf

FOR KEN GOLDBERG

1

There is the friend my age.
He tells me how often
he finds himself standing
on his bed, coming up
from sleep, while his arms
continue to shove wolves' heads
off the mattress. We laugh
when he tells this story.
His wife repeats, it's true,
it's true.

2

In high school
I was a bone-thin distance runner.
Mornings, the bathroom mirror
never failed to highlight each rib.

Ten years past college
and the body burdens the mind.
I stand sideways
and the mirror shows me
the first degeneration
of my male breasts. I picture
what's to come: how they will drop
into my seventy-fifth year,
my neck pleated, my hair white,
my legs offering
their thin reminder, how

I'd burst the last quarter
of the County Mile for the gold
and the lovely grit of victory.

Night has come over the neighborhoods.
I stretch past the first mile
and my breathing counts in the clear air.
Voices from stoops pause as I pass.
Each step deliberates the street,
avoids potholes, the spill
in the backstretch,

the moon-cast shadows
shattering at my feet.

3

Tomorrow, as I chop vegetables
for dinner, as my lover
sets the table
and Segovia's exact romance
spins on the stereo, my mother

will call to speak
of Glenn's wedding, his
maturity, how someday soon
he'll have children.

Both of us pause:
we can see them ascending
beneath him like birds

into old age.

Once, in Florida
my friend and I talked till dawn,
laughing about our great
adolescent pain. Look with me
at the gold iridescence of leaves
in the first explosion of morning:
it is without sentimentality,
it delineates each green vein,
it is without history
or prediction.

But dusk, like talk, is all
of these things, dusk that I loved
as a child in summer, when
I'd sit with my parents
after dinner, the air full
of barbecue and laughter, dusk
that entered my father
the evening he died, an aneurism
screaming in his last thought.
When I'd seen him three days
before, he could not speak
and I knew then the black funnel
twisting from the period
of his eye. In twelve years
I will be his senior.

If I think too much of death
I turn instead to sunlight
and watch my lover in the garden
pulling weeds while her skin reddens
and the low leaves stir.

Behind her the chickens cackle
over new eggs, and in the pasture
six sheep nibble in the shade.

This week, she tells the story
of new sounds: how one learns
to recognize the notes of each season,
how she could tell the shimmering
tomato leaf from a whistling vine, how
she'd been rounding mounds
for cantaloupe one recent day
when something new was in the air,
and she rose
to tour the property.

There, in the back
acre, an unexpected birth: a lamb
was learning to speak its first words.

Point is, she says with pride,
I could tell six sheep
from five. One must listen . . .

My father's younger brother speaks
of the incremental losses
of strength. I think,
something else to deny!

He is finally gray, and he tells me
one never likes to work, only
one must, believe me. I think

of this when the night air
is cool and I'm pulling beneath me the center of each
street, working against
the jeweled ticks of a stopwatch.

It is said little by little
a shadow appears, rising
from the lowest horizon of sight
until it crosses every path.

Today, my father as a young man
stands in a field
admiring summer, the good earth.
Many miles off, death
approaches like permanent weather.

My lover calls me to the garden.
We listen
to the land, the sun raking
dry winds, the moon rising wildly,
the empty air always satisfied
with our words. I grant
the wolf its moment, watching
that bad times are not rendered
by my own false shadows. Now,
dusk calls me
from my father's field, says
before you write, know me.