

River

Remember, Daddy, that drive we took together
just you and me?
in your father's huge, heavy Packard
the black one with the chrome grille
like a teathy silver smirk?

I imagined that grille grinning when we went over the slope
me holding onto the leather dashboard
with small, splayed fingers
screaming your name.
This was after you'd reached for the flat bottle in the glove box, winking at me
After you'd settled me under your arm as you drove one-handed
sometimes one-elbowed
to raise the bottle from where it lay against your spread thigh
and tip your head back against the tuck and roll to drink

It was after the tilt of wheel
the rush and crackle of small, gray bushes
and the big car slipping, slipping sideways
fast
down shale and stubble of foliage
faster and faster down the rock-studded slant of dirt
to the green, slow surge of the river

And I remember that river
as confident as a fat snake unrolling itself
through trees that looked like they were nodding in sleep in the heat
I remember the way the water moved
like the slow shrug of muscles under the hide of some giant beast
And I remember that smirking grille of the car
crumpled against the tree
the door swinging open
me falling or stumbling out
I don't know which
my feet wet from the river water filling the foot well
to split my mouth on a gray rock
– I can still remember the white marbling of it,
its warm mineral smell

And then, Daddy, I remember the front of my dress
red and stiffening, and you inside
your head slumped over the wheel
and the smell of blood
yours and mine both
thick and sweet in the air

The taste of that smell on the tongue
in odd moments
paints memory
more vivid than a photograph

But sometimes I have us
hike down with the cloth and the picnic basket to the river's edge
Mummy and Evie and me
eating deviled eggs and corn beef sandwiches and root beer,
hypnotized by that green slow surge of water
waiting for Daddy
who'd gone back to the car
for a map, he said, though Mum's warning "Earl!"
made Evie and I look at each other
see the yellow paste of eggs between our teeth
and bend to our sandwiches again
remembering the flat bottle in the glove box.
Daddy gone a long time
a long, long time and Mum getting to her feet to shade her eyes
and look up the hill
then the grille of the car cresting the slope
and Mummy, in her dotted frock
knees bent
shoulders hunched
elbows in
fists in front of her face
screaming "Earl! Don't!" then "Ea-aarl!"
in a long trilling cry
and the big car slipping sideways
the grill grinning silver chrome

Evie says no
that's just the time he crushed the fender
and that's just the way Mummy screamed
when she saw the blood on me and heard about Dad
She always screams like that
hunched over
and how did I split my lip then?

It doesn't make sense
cuz it can't happen twice
and I say
oh, yes, it happens over and over and over
and each time
I try to stop it

Claire Ortalda