

Prairie Dogs

for Khyber Oser

and in memory of Matthew Shepard (1976–1998)

They tenanted the far high school field,
the dispossessed Lotaburger lot, the dog run.
Shifty, sometimes rabid, they dared to stand

upright, almost human, and stare. I feared their deft
hands, the shrug of shoulders before they spiraled
underground. That day one hung panting on a twist

of barbed wire; front paws scored the dirt.
A ripped haunch, roiling and bloody, flashed,
and I turned away, yanking the dog behind me,

when my young cousin whispered *what's*
this, and groped for a stick to free the leg,
and when that didn't work, he knelt in the trashy

run, his face close to the scrabbler, fingers
plying the greasy, furred gash, the entrails
glazed with flies which might have deterred

someone else, but he sat, now cross-legged,
unwinding the wrecked limb the way the hands
that lifted the boy in Wyoming must have worked.

To A Poet

for Maxine Kumin

You never found comfort in doctrine
but in the winter
coats of your horses and in the climbing

tendrils of your beans
all making their way into the strict lines
to which I now return

You set the cool spring trail ride on Amanda
alongside the slaughterer's
bullet slamming sidelong

You set the body
swimming in the pond, mind dissolving
and shucking off its burden

You let the woman lie down with the bear
and migrate
with the arctic caribou Your anguish

in aligning loss
with love became metrical protests
as a gorgeous May

afternoon enters every window of the house
where someone is sick
and someone is reading to the sick

and someone makes supper using
every language available to say *nourishment*,
mystery, *wisdom*,

and *I will sleep on the floor in your room*

Hospice

I wanted to believe in it, the word
softer than *hospital* but still not *home*—

like any other frame house on the street,
it had a lawn, a door, a bell—

inside, our friend lay, a view
of the garden from her room but no lift

to raise her from the bed. A sword,
the sun plunged across the cotton blankets.

I wanted dying to be Mediterranean,
curated, a villa, like the Greek sanatoria

where the ancients cared for their sick
on airy porticos and verandas

with stone paths that led to libraries.
A nurse entered her room and closed the door.

For the alleviation of pain, I praise
Morpheus, god of dreams, unlocking

the medicine drawer with a simple key,
narcotic placed beneath the tongue.

In the hall, the volunteer offered us coffee.
How could I think the Mozart in G major

we played to distract her could distract her?
Or marble sculpture in the atrium?

A Last Go

My mother takes the world into her mouth,
she takes the sour-cream coffee cake and
the *rugelach* with walnuts and currants.
She wants a pecan raisin loaf, two loaves,
See's suckers, and *mandelbrodt*,
and I'll take her hunger any way I can,
mainlining my mother's desires, finding
in her appetites the young woman—
tortoise-shell sunglasses and dark hair
pulled back in a silk scarf—
who gunned the white Ford Galaxy, hardtop
convertible, a ringer for Jackie O.
This is her reward for years
of tuning deprivation
like a violin, of learning to do more on less
and less until she lived on argument, solo
performance, dry toast and black coffee, the fish
dish halved. Now that medical studies show
the skinny live longer, she's gained
the sweet taste of being right all along.
Go ahead, Ma, try the ginger scones,
the lemon poppy seed cake.
All the hours you hoarded have turned
into years; there's time for a last
go at pleasure.