

“Walking Back Up Depot Street”

In Hollywood, California (she'd been told), women travel on roller skates, pull a string of children, grinning, gaudy-eyed as merry-go-round horses, brass-wheeled under a blue canopy of sky.

Beatrice had never lived in such a place. This morning, for instance, beside Roxboro Road, she'd seen a woman with no feet wheel her chair into fragile clumps of new grass. Her legs ended at the ankle, old brown cypress knees. She furrowed herself by hand through the ground. Cars passed. The sky stared down. At the center of the world's blue eye, the woman stared back.

Years revolved, began to circle Beatrice, a ring of burning eyes. They flared and smoked like the sawmill fires she walked past

as a child, in the afternoon at four o'clock, she and a dark woman, past the cotton gin, onto the bridge above the railroad tracks. There they waited for wheels to rush like the wings of an iron angel, for the white man at the engine to blow the whistle. Beatrice had waited to stand in the tremble of power.

Thirty years later she saw the scar, the woman who had walked beside her then, split but determined to live, raising mustard greens to get through the winter. Whether she had, this spring, Beatrice did not know. If she was sitting, knotted feet to the stove, if the coal had lasted, if she cared for her company, pictures under table glass, the eyes of children she had raised for others.

If Beatrice went back to visit her house, sat unsteady in a chair in the smoky room, they'd be divided by past belief, the town's parallel tracks, people never to meet even in distance. They would be joined

by the memory of walking back up Depot Street.

She could sit

and say: *I have changed, have tried to replace the iron heart
with a heart of flesh.*

But the woman whose hands had washed her,
had pulled a brush through her hair, whose hands had brought her maypops,
the green fruit and purple flowers, fierce eyes of living creatures—
What had she given her, that woman, anything all these years?

Words would not remake the past. She could not make it
vanish like an old photograph thrown onto live coals.

If she meant to live in the present, she would have to work, do
without, send money, call home long distance about the heat.