

## 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.