

WAILING

Walking from west to east past the living
dead man on the corner of Grove and Fourth
north side of the bank I closed my eyes
so I wouldn't have to see his stumps and the red
mouth without a tongue and make the water
rush through my ears so I wouldn't have to hear him.

And sitting on the bench across the street
I exchanged ideas with the woman next to me
on a question in ethics, Kant and Schlegel; I made
a reference to early Herodotus, she stuck by
Bentham, pleasure and pain, though she was loyal
also to Hobbes, he of the loathsome universe.

While the sun, though who would notice it, was covered
in what the older Plato would call slime
and the one tree that didn't have metal growing
through it shook with life—I'd say it was leaves
but birds rushed by and one was Bentham and one
was Hobbes himself, one of the true slime-chasers.

And sitting across from me although the lice
drove him crazy was the master of nuance
lifting a wing and eating, he of the blinking
eyes we waited for standing alone
and walking along the slats of his bench, the prince
of bleeding mouths, I'm sure, and duke of welts,

not to mention organs erupting and faces
some black and some red but all with huge creases and I,
with a scholar like that, I kept him in bread, I gave him
one Guggenheim after another, I even
gave him a Hobbes, a half a bagel, with seeds
from the opium tree and did my drumming, hands

on the cement armrests, now beginning to clap,
and a tongue of my own inside my mouth, still thinking,
still talking, I will learn to forgive, still lucky
to have a tongue and sit in New York and bleed
only a little, from one or two cuts, and lucky
to walk the way I do and have my own secret

and shoulder my bag as I get up and walk
to another part of the city past, I'm sure,
shoes and wine and futons, thinking up
a plan for not eating, a place for my papers, a room
to read in, a chair to live in my next two years
and keep my tongue intact, poor suffering mouth

at the corner of Fourth and Grove, and lie down hard
when I have to and sit where I want and wait for my own
restaurant to open and drink my coffee at last
in a certain park, at another bench, this one
with curved iron sides in stamped black: fruit and flowers
and yellow lacquered slats, a bench for wailing,

with a name on it in English and even dates
for someone to study and only three short lines
to memorize, the plate attached with bolts
from front to back, the metal treated, a rat
for witness, a sparrow to eat the pizza, a *Times*
to sit on, a daughter for whistling, a mother for staring,

and someone to loosen the bolts and someone to stand
in front of me with a flute and throw his hat
on a little Turkish rug and someone to sit
beside me and wail, "Coffee from 1940,"
"pie from 1936," the only
song I know, half Mississippi, half Poland.