A WOMAN DEAD IN HER FORTIES

1.
Your breasts/ sliced-off The scars
dimmed as they would have to be
years later

All the women I grew up with are sitting
half-naked on rocks in sun
we look at each other and
are not ashamed

and you too have taken off your blouse
but this was not what you wanted:

to show your scarred, deleted torso

I barely glance at you
as if my look could scald you
though I'm the one who loved you

I want to touch my fingers
to where your breasts had been
but we never did such things

You hadn't thought everyone
would look so perfect
unmutilated

you pull on
your blouse again: stern statement:

There are things I will not share
with everyone
2. You send me back to share my own scars first of all with myself
What did I hide from her what have I denied her what losses suffered
how in this ignorant body did she hide
waiting for her release till uncontrollable light began to pour
from every wound and suture and all the sacred openings

3. Wartime. We sit on warm weathered, softening grey boards
the ladder glimmers where you told me the leeches swim
I smell the flame of kerosene the pine
boards where we sleep side by side in narrow cots
the night-meadow exhaling its darkness calling

child into woman
child into woman
woman

4. Most of our love from the age of nine took the form of jokes and mute
loyalty: you fought a girl who said she’d knock me down
we did each other’s homework wrote letters kept in touch, untouched
lied about our lives: I wearing the face of the proper marriage
you the face of the independent woman We cleaved to each other across that space fingering webs of love and estrangement till the day
the gynecologist touched your breast and found a palpable hardness

5. You played heroic, necessary games with death
since in your neo-protestant tribe the void was supposed not to exist except as a fashionable concept
you had no traffic with
I wish you were here tonight I want
to yell at you

Don't accept
Don't give in

But would I be meaning your brave
irreproachable life, you dean of women, or

your unfair, unfashionable, unforgivable
woman's death?

6.
You are every woman I ever loved
and disavowed

a bloody incandescent chord strung out
across years, tracts of space

How can I reconcile this passion
with our modesty

your calvinist heritage
my girlhood frozen into forms

how can I go on this mission
without you

you, who might have told me
everything you feel is true?

7.
Time after time in dreams you rise
reproachful

once from a wheelchair pushed by your father
across a lethal expressway

Of all my dead it's you
who come to me unfinished

You left me amber beads
strung with turquoise from an Egyptian grave

I wear them wondering
How am I true to you?

I'm half-afraid to write poetry
for you who never read it much

and I'm left laboring
with the secrets and the silence

In plain language: I never told you how I loved you
we never talked at your deathbed of your death

8.
One autumn evening in a train
catching the diamond-flash of sunset

in puddles along the Hudson
I thought: I understand

life and death now, the choices
I didn't know your choice

or how by then you had no choice
how the body tells the truth in its rush of cells

Most of our love took the form
of mute loyalty

*we never spoke at your deathbed of your death*

but from here on
I want more crazy mourning, more howl, more keening

We stayed mute and disloyal
because we were afraid

I would have touched my fingers
to where your breasts had been
but we never did such things

1974–1977