

## O Mother

O Mother, whose breast my lips never touched  
whose milk dried up with my middle-child sister  
who shut me out at the advent of toddlerhood  
who brightened for my father  
lightened for my sisters  
and darkened for me  
who, when hurt, I would rather bleed and cry alone  
than go to  
to receive only disapproval and annoyance

O Mother, whose withered soul  
whose cold, still emptiness repelled me  
Where were you  
withdrawn behind that hard, blank wall?  
Was there a person there at all?

O Mother, who never tried to protect me  
from the vicious attacks  
of my manic father  
who, at your life's end  
told me when asked  
that you would quietly urge restraint  
in the sanctuary of your private moments with him  
But how could that help me  
never having seen it  
never knowing I had anyone to speak for me  
with only my sister  
on my side?

O Mother, my dead, blank mother  
my depressive mother  
my manic father's other side  
who could only be his  
whose soul he came to collect  
at your time of cremation  
whose love for each other  
I could clearly see then  
and only several times  
in life

For years approaching his death  
you lay in bed flat on your back

growing your toenails a curled-up foot  
rubbing the skin off above your heels  
ruminating as you did so much of your life

Do you know you helped him die  
forcing his quinidine upon him  
starving out the vital red carriers of his very blood  
till the few left finally quit?

In your short hospital stint  
you would bite the nurse who annoyed you  
as you would sharp-elbow your siblings aside as a child  
to make room for yourself

O Mother, I couldn't go to you for anything  
but the wonderful dinners  
my father's wrath  
caused me to toss  
the lunches in which my heart delighted  
simple and unhealthy as they were  
and the little incidentals  
of everyday life

You gave me this life  
such as it's been

a fair exchange  
for my eight years  
of semi-caretaking you