The Stories We Know

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The Stories We Know

Sara, there's nothing here of my own.
Until today, a bank of weeds masked
The front of the house, and its rotting basements.
A young woman worked, cutting the stalks.
It's not because of her that I think of you,
But because I'm alone; and weeds,
Great felled forests of over-sized daisy
And thistle, cover the yard.
A lizard, quick as its own tongue,
Hurries from shadow to shadow in hopes
That somewhere shelter exists.
I'm not quick or willing
Enough to try to catch its neon tail,
Which, I've learned, it would leave
In my hand, barter for its escape.

The friendship of women is easy to understand.
Whenever I go to my true home,
The one I claim, I go to you,
And the rank apartment stinking of catpiss;
And the furniture draped with your uniforms;
And your shoes like broken toys all over the floor;
And the box of cereal open and stale
On the radiator; and the Scrabble scores
On envelopes, with yours forever highest
Because you love to cheat;
And the dozens of plants campaigning for water
With an ominous dropping of leaves;
And books on the shelves from classes
That we took together, starved
For the love of our desperate teachers;
And the name of your brother,
Which is everywhere but mostly unspoken
Because he took his own life.
Once I thought a photo of him
Was of you at an awkward age.
Because I didn’t know, I laughed.
Because in my foolishness I hurt you,
His story became my business,
The details my duty to keep.

Stories are secrets that fell from grace,
From the elegance of the heart’s solitude.
The older we grow, the less we work
To find out things that once we wept to uncover—
And we were a team, ransacking.
We stayed out of each others’ way.
Now you say: Let it be known what we found.
I’d like to have back our conspiracies,
Our peerless confidence born of fear.
But we faltered. We began to grow up.
Now it’s plain that the scratching we hear
At the unlocked window is only an elm
In need of pruning, or a sparrow come down
From confusing heights and lost
For a moment on earth. We’re no longer
At the center of things, and if we’re now
Less visible, we’re warm with the jostling
Of crowds around us. We’re closer

To the unwashed heavens, yet we’re still
Ourselves, discrete, a thousand miles between us.
That is what stars feel, pulsing strongly
Against a deep black background. Sara,
I’ve never wanted many friends.
I’ve longed to be one of your blood kin,
With your bad dental records
And sturdy bones. And I’ve longed
To stop aging or simply to die young,
But painlessly, like a watch left outdoors
On a damp night, or a canvas
With the figure of a lovely girl
Blocked in, and set aside.
On the phone you tell me that in the past weeks
You've been moved to tears
By inconsequence—a story overheard
While waiting in line, of a boy
Questioned by police on crimes
About which he knew nothing.
I tell you all the stories I know.
Most of them you've heard already.
They sound like jokes in comparison
To the one that flickered from a distant source
Like a star burning out in sorrow.
When the weeds take root again, I'll dream
Of every acre on earth they claim,
And then I'll come and tell you.
I'll know how to make us both laugh.