

Lament
by Barbara Bowman

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,--*
—John Keats, "To Autumn"

It is fitting on this day of cold bluster and unsentimental sunlight to write of endings. Spring, so recently past, seems a dream. Was it so long ago that I, like spring, burst onto the scene? The faces and days of my youth are veiled within the mist of memory, but not beyond my reach. I inhale and the aroma of lilacs engulfs me, just as they encircled my house. A sister is born; she is named June Iris, but she has arrived too early in April. She is carried home in her namesake month. My mother places her in the sunlight that leaks between our drapes. We have to be quiet; she is sleeping. . . . In an instant I am riding my bicycle beneath the elms whose branches rise to the sky like the vaulted ceiling of a cathedral. Lining my street, they provide a cool respite from the relentless heat of a Midwestern sun. The orb drifts over, shifting the patterns of shade and light as though it were setting designs in stained glass. Sometimes with a friend, but more often alone, I gallop my two-wheeled steed up and down the block. Obsessed with horses and the westerns on television, I have no need for companions to challenge my imagination and diminish the enjoyment. In pretend, I wile away the days of girlhood that reach to a future I never consider.

I try to recall the sounds. The birds sang, I'm certain. Surely there were the shouts that accompanied the games. But there is no music in my reverie, no sound to break the white silence. Like the caterpillar in its cocoon, I'm insulated within myself. The Wind. I remember the wind as it rushed through the elms, ruffling the branches or swirling them in circles. I turn and am standing in the picture window that looked out upon our street. The sky is blackish green. The trees shift violently from side to side. I watch, oblivious to the potential danger of a breakaway limb, mesmerized by the dance before me. Soon the rain will come in sheets, plunging the temperature, blessedly washing away the heat, if only as an interlude. As quickly as it arose with flashes and crashes, the storm sweeps on, leaving the trees gasping in its wake. Slowly the sun returns. Fog rises from the pavement and returns to the sky whence it had fallen minutes before. Tiny twigs litter the grass, orphans ripped from the arms of their mothers.

The mist parts. . . . Rising from the narrow piles scrunched at the edge of the pavement, the incense of fall permeates my hair and clothing. After hours of labor and the accumulation of blisters come the pleasures of fire and smoke. Carefully the burning debris must be guarded. Raked and re-raked, it nourishes the flames and feeds the billows. Large-finned, two-tone automobiles crawl along, uncertain of what lies within the orangey-gray cloud--a child, a rambling mutt, or another creeping vehicle. Finally, as the day concludes with the sun sending forth its blazing rays on the horizon, the embers die. . . .

Night. Walking by, I peek into the homes that glow from within. Dinners are being eaten beneath brightly lit chandeliers. Televisions radiate light from living room corners, reflecting their cool blue images off the walls on which shadows undulate. The elms stand motionless, arms silhouetted against the sky. The cool of the year has set in, boding the cold to come. Leaves shed, the trees stand unselfconsciously in their nakedness. The moon slides up behind them causing a shiver. When winter sweeps in, the winds will rise and the branches will groan and crack, dropping fluffy pillows of snow to the ground below.

Turning in the mist, I am enclosed within walls of an airplane, impervious to the freezing temperatures outside the window. It is a starlit night, and below I see the golden lights of town after city

laid out in sparkling display against the black that surrounds them. There are few passengers aboard, and I sit alone, head resting against the window. Through my headphones, I listen to a woman's voice sing, ". . . Love transcending time and place. . ." Her melancholy tone suits my journey. Over and over I listen to her and a mournful soprano saxophone as the plane hurtles on, transcending time and place. As we approach the brilliance that is the Chicago night, I observe the other planes that fly so near by. We descend and enter swirling snow. Endlessly we are in the cloud, suspended between the stars above and the luminance below. I have made this journey before, sometimes driving through snowstorms, sometimes in the rain. Always, I arrive in the darkness. June Iris, the springtime baby, my sole sister, has been struck by a killer that only x-rays reveal. She is fighting the good fight. After this crisis, she will rally, and I will return home to live in anticipation of the next phone call. . . .

It comes on an October morning: 7:00 a.m. She is gone. Once again I journey. Laid out, she is unlike the last time I saw her. No longer does she slide to one side, unable to hold her head erect. Eyes closed, the wild-eyed look forever gone. Pain removed, she looks seventeen again, not forty-seven. I stare at her dry-eyed. I have shed so many tears since she became ill that now I stand more as an observer than her sister. What I recall is the strain in her face as she tried to talk with great effort, until even her voice was silenced, and she could follow you only intermittently with her eyes. In spring, she arrived too early; in autumn, she departed too soon.

After she is laid to rest under a tree, I return to the street on which we grew up. Gone for a long time, I have returned often to walk my street in the past four years of her sickness. Familiar faces are not to be found. Neighbors have moved on, or died. There is no one with whom to converse. No one to ask, "Do you remember my sister, June? She died, you know." The stately elms are but a memory; the street smiles a gap-toothed grin. Disease has ravaged my trees, leaving only a remnant of their past glory. Disease moved silently and unseen from sentinel to sentinel. Year after year, tree after tree was sprayed with a large yellow X that shouted its fate. Only God was privy to the developing catastrophe in the elms, and only God was privy to the inner workings of the killer within my sister. Patiently and with dignity, the trees and June met their fate.

Now I stand alone as the last elm, as all have fallen before me. It is a strange feeling to have lost your final, familial connection. No one but I remembers my family from the inside. I am too young to have everyone gone. . . .

Memory. It is an incredible phenomenon. No one else has mine. My mother's and father's died with them, and now my sister's memories are gone, too. Where did they go? Have they ceased to exist? My childhood memories are a series of Edward Hopper paintings, rich in color with sharp angles of light and shadow. The figures coexist, but do not touch. There is no sentimentality or nostalgia. When I cease to exist, will they become dust like me, a part of the cosmos?

It is autumn and I am in my autumn. Spring is long gone, and, for the first time, I now feel the approaching winter. Like grain, I have matured, and, at the proper time, the winnower will come for me. I will be ready. I have cast off my seed into the rich humus born of past generations. It has taken root, and now sings its own Song of Spring. In my quiet moments, I hear sweet music: the laughing voices of children; my own, and now my grandchildren's. I lift their little bodies and hold them tightly against me. I want to remember each moment. I have not made my final memory, but it is a sweet sadness.