

like an easy birth.  
I bend and unfasten my sandals.  
Stepping down from their slight eminence,  
I lift my sandals by the heel straps  
and sling them into position, side by side,  
in the closet. They'll never be lonely.  
Shoes are the twins among garments  
and finish each other's sentences.

For economy of motion, skirt, stockings, underpants  
come off all at once, but I separate them.  
It's a small quarrel, easily ignored.  
Skirt, go to bed. Stockings, drape over the chair.  
Underpants, into the corner with you.  
I'll deal with you all later.  
Good night clothes. Until tomorrow.

#### THE HENS THAT CAME WITH THE PLACE

We've bought a farm,  
a little twenty-acre farm;  
it came with chickens. Eleven hens.  
Mornings, these hens  
come out to cluck at us,  
and if they're out of food or water  
and in a mood for grouching,  
they cluck very sternly.

With a dim-witted but serious look,  
they stand at the chicken-wire fence  
and go raawk, raaawk, raaaawk,  
until, like childish gods who've been off playing  
with thunderbolts,  
we realize,  
we're guilty.

I've never had chickens before.  
Once I had a chick  
a neighbor lady gave me.  
I was only four.  
The chick got sick and was no more,  
but I remember its inverted eyelid,  
wonder of that small world.  
Its sleepy sickly closing  
like the eyes of a red-haired boy I knew,  
or the turgid closing  
of the eye on an immobile miniature alligator  
displayed downtown in the dusty window  
of an insurance company along with  
a triptych of pictures (a wreck,  
a tornado, an earthquake)

and the time of day  
on a black electric clock with white numbers  
encircled by the name  
of the Insurance.

But these hens, they are not  
like that.  
They are fat and red and rusty,  
and anxious to remind us:  
We came with the place!

At night, the hens jostle one another  
on the perch in the henhouse  
to get the best position; what that is  
I can't fathom,  
maybe where it feels they won't get eaten.  
This goes on for an hour  
after sundown, shoving and clucking:  
a rustle, squawk, and then a heavy slump  
as a dislodged chicken hits the floor of the coop.  
Fortunately, these bodies rise,  
and then more shoving  
until at last they close  
those unnatural eyelids  
and sleep.

On hot days, if the water dries to ash  
or they have drunk it all, one hen at least  
is apt to scale the brace of the fence and escape  
over the wall into the pasture  
where there's a watering trough.  
The commotion of this escape is enough to warn us:  
chickens are breaking out; bring water.  
And then they gather, clucking,  
We do not want to get out,  
but you leave us no choice.  
We, who came with the place  
must be minded. Shame on you.

Then I take the hose and fill  
their water tank.  
They strut and sip and toss their heads and gargle,  
throats full, like tasters at the winery on the hill.

These chickens are stern.  
They will not excuse us in neglect,  
and yet, when all is mended,  
there is a fluster of: She meant no harm.  
She is new here.  
And then a chorus: Oh Layena, chicken-manna,  
oh lettuce leaf, oh rotten apple  
with a bug in it,  
oh stoney water from the outdoor faucet,

oh lovely, lovely chicken house.  
Oh farm.  
This is our place.  
We came with it.

#### CUT HER HAIR

"Cut her hair. It takes  
the strength from her. She's  
too skinny," they said to Mother.  
It's true, I was light  
as a fish bone on the beach  
that summer;  
a dried smelt of a girl at six,  
I blew this way and that way  
in the winds of my own laughter,  
shrieking and running at the beauty parlor  
while Mother had her hair done.  
Elsewhere, the war went on  
I knew, but what was war?  
Hitler, that bad man; the absent boys next door  
who sent home nazi flags or coconuts,  
depending where they were.  
But I ran careless in the beauty shop  
which smelled of perfume and ammonia; I ran  
up and down between the dryers  
where ladies sat  
having their curls set.

"How about a finger wave?"  
Alvina said to Mother, and I pictured  
fingers gaily waving, as to men  
in Pathe newsreels marching ten by ten.  
In the beauty shop, where ladies came  
to shop for beauty, nails  
glittered like carapace of insects,  
and curled at the ends of fingers  
like the hooves of horses I'd seen  
crippled by neglect.  
Never neglected, I knew I was lucky.  
"Oh, eat your Cream of Wheat!"  
Mother cried, like other mothers of that time,  
"Just think, of children starving overseas.  
Oh, eat." I cared  
about those children;  
but I was thin by naughty preference  
and chose to run or read instead of eating,  
and my hair grew.  
My long hair. Commonly  
french-braided, then turned  
up in loops like handles on a purse