COUNTING

I spent the first years of my life in the most delightful coma: unable to count money or read clocks. How telling this early idiocy really was. In second grade my teacher discovered the quarters in my pocket meant no more to me than the pennies and this sent her into a fury. What planet had I been sleeping on? If only she knew. Where I lived, neighborhood cats gathered for tea and trees spoke a language as quiet as dew. I imagined my own growth this way: my knee filling the space where my head had once been. Snow, a miracle I’d never seen, was two parts cloud and one part dust. Of course, my parents were determined to instruct me. They opened a card table in the living room near a window full of sky and they covered that table with coins. We spent hours together leaned over our neat stacks of dimes: I was their first child; they wanted to do everything right. I felt the penny should be worth more than the dime; I got stuck on this point. I couldn’t tell the big hand from the little one on the clock. I have never liked to measure—not flour or milk—and certainly not something invisible and unfriendly like time. Days came and went. The light in my window was everything. I caught a deadly spider in a jar; I learned to play piano from an old woman I met in the street. Sometimes, at night, I heard the clock in the kitchen ticking. Sometimes my father lifted me—his bird—over a restaurant counter, enough money in my hand to settle the bill.