THE GLIDER

for my sister, Lynn

There’s no reason for her to have bopped me
on the head with the hard rubber end of her silver
twirling baton, except that I didn’t want to play majorette
and so she wasn’t fair and I know I wasn’t either,
though I tried as my father told me to walk in her shoes.
But those shoes? Must I have walked, pranced around
in those shoes? My sister is five years old
in the photograph and I’m seven.

I don’t know what my mother intended
sealing us up like this in the aftermath of the quarrel.
She’d come out of the house with the Kodak.
Don’t you dare move, she said to my sister.
Hush your crying, she said to me with no pity,
and put us side-by-side on the porch glider with its red
plastic cushions, their big painted-on flowers.
The knot on my head swelling and throbbing.

My sister is grinning big in the photograph,
the scuffed-up soles of her shoes sticking straight out
at the camera, and I’m serious, my eyes
black pools into which the world has dropped
its hard and simple questions. She’s stepping high in the grass
pretending she has white boots on—little pom-poms swishing,
hers baton flashing, the whole football stadium
screaming for more of her fancy foot-and-wristwork.

Fifty years later, we’re looking through tins of loose
family photographs and here it is in black-and-white,
the cushions gray now, the flowers
white camellias—we’d forgotten that part.
But we both remember her time-out on the glider,
the worst kind of punishment, especially for her.
She’s not pouting, she’s fidgeting and plotting
an early escape, the glider bumping and squeaking.
I’m looking at the photograph—yes, it was right there it all began, discovering and settling our differences—
I sat on the brick steps with my chin in my hands and studied the green summer grass. And night after night, Dad came out after supper and sat between us. We played count-the-cars until dark and headlights came on and we couldn’t any longer see the models of the cars and we counted the stars to the end of the numbers.

Mother is gone now and father too, under the grass, settled together just months ago. We’re tearing apart the house we lived in, everything trashed or boxed-up, clothes in plastic bags, furniture collected for the Salvation Army. Everything’s a mess, an impossibly organized arrangement of drolleries with a merciless logic. My sister tells me what to do—to sort things out and let them go.