

**Ai**

**ICE**

breaks up in obelisks on the river,  
as I stand beside your grave.

I tip my head back.

Above me, the same sky you loved,  
that shawl of cotton wool,  
frozen around the shoulders of Minnesota.

I'm cold and so far from Texas  
and my father, who gave me to you.

I was twelve, a Choctaw, a burden.

*A woman*, my father said, raising my skirt.

Then he showed you the roll of green gingham,  
stained red, that I'd tried to crush to powder  
with my small hands. I close my eyes,

and it is March, 1866 again.

I'm fourteen, wearing a white smock.

I straddle the rocking horse you made for me  
and stroke the black mane cut from my own hair.

Sunrise hugs you from behind,  
as you walk through the open door.

You lay the velvet beside me  
and I give you the ebony box  
that holds the baby's skull.

You set it on your work table,  
comb your pale blond hair with one hand,  
then nail it shut.

The new baby starts crying. I cover my ears,  
watching as you lift him from the cradle  
and lay him on the pony skin rug.

I untie the red scarf, knotted at my throat,  
climb off the horse and bend over you,  
as you kneel beside the boy.

I slip the scarf around your neck,  
and pull it tightly, remembering how I strangled the other baby  
and laid her on your stomach while you were asleep.

You break my hold and pull me to the floor.  
I put my hand inside my pocket,  
while you walk around me slowly taking off your clothes.  
I scratch you, bite your lips, your face,  
then you cry out,  
and I open and close my hands  
around a row of bear teeth.

I open my eyes.  
I wanted you then, and now  
and I never let you know.  
I kiss the headstone.  
Tonight, wake me like always.  
Talk and I'll listen,  
while you lie on the pallet  
resting your arms behind your head,  
telling me about the wild rice in the marshes  
and the empty .45 you call *Grace of God* that keeps you alive,  
as we slide forward, without bitterness, decade by decade,  
becoming transparent. Everlasting.