

*THE VIGIL,  
A POEM IN FOUR VOICES, 1993*

**“Lila”**

(excerpt)

Round, around the walnut table  
with its central stem and lions feet . . .  
I gathered us for dinners.  
I remember the idle talk of boars  
and houses, tall glasses of iced tea,  
cups of milk. I remember how Stephen  
carved, each slice so perfectly  
drawn down he might as well have used  
his architect’s rule. I remember  
linens that were never marked  
by purpled circles or half circles.  
Bart sailed bread cubes  
over the surface of his soup. Sarah made  
stories from her blue willow plate—  
birds changed back to lovers,  
a house floated like a flower  
beneath a bridge, around the world  
to China, where someone needed succor,  
needed her potatoes—I’d given  
her too much to eat.

I remember Stephen missing dinner—  
too much work, late conferences, too much  
booze—each absence so unpredictable  
I refused to take out a table leaf  
or know he wasn’t coming. I liked  
our dinner mats just to touch  
at the top corners. I liked the easy  
reach of hands joined first  
to bless this food to our use,  
the easy reach of my fork into Sarah’s  
plate, into Bart’s.

I remember, oh,  
setting the table the night  
Bart died, four places, and his special  
cup—I had to, I don’t know why.  
Although Stephen, pushing his plate  
into the flowers, scraping the floor  
with his chair, said he knew.  
Sarah watched us dry eyed.  
Her spoon turned circles in her soup.  
The ripples widened, and when  
Jennie came to be in Bart’s place,  
the emptiness filled. We were  
a happy family, or I wanted us  
to be . . .