

## *The Autopsy Room*

Then I was young and had the strength of ten.  
For anything, I thought. Though part of my job  
at night was to clean the autopsy room  
once the coroner's work was done. But now  
and then they knocked off early, or too late.  
For, so help me, they left things out  
on their specially built table. A little baby,  
still as a stone and snow cold. Another time,  
a huge black man with white hair whose chest  
had been laid open. All his vital organs  
lay in a pan beside his head. The hose  
was running, the overhead lights blazed.  
And one time there was a leg, a woman's leg,  
on the table. A pale and shapely leg.  
I knew it for what it was. I'd seen them before.  
Still, it took my breath away.

When I went home at night my wife would say,  
"Sugar, it's going to be all right. We'll trade  
this life in for another." But it wasn't  
that easy. She'd take my hand between her hands  
and hold it tight, while I leaned back on the sofa  
and closed my eyes. Thinking of . . . something.  
I don't know what. But I'd let her bring  
my hand to her breast. At which point  
I'd open my eyes and stare at the ceiling, or else  
the floor. Then my fingers strayed to her leg.  
Which was warm and shapely, ready to tremble

and raise slightly, at the slightest touch.  
But my mind was unclear and shaky. Nothing  
was happening. Everything was happening. Life  
was a stone, grinding and sharpening.