

Summer at the Lake

This may be gossip
but that doesn't make it unimportant.

— *Bronwen Wallace*, "Place of Origin"

Sunday evening the speedboats are all docked.
In the long ribbon of dark shoreline across the lake
one light is left shining. Voices sound clear
over still water: he's off to the city to a job
he hates to need, she's left here with the kids
and no telephone. The baby's wailing makes it all
simpler. Her voice rises and rises. Slam
of the car door, red lights retreating

like eyes closing at last after staring too long
at cracks in the ceiling. Her story so familiar
I can see us sitting at the table, pottery mugs
steaming in the cool dusk of the summer kitchen.
The ash of her cigarette lengthens, drops, she talks
as if the words can't get out of her mouth fast enough,
she chews on them, spits them. "You know?"
she keeps saying and I do. How women stitch
their lives together with anecdote, with telling
and listening for the pauses, the words suddenly
swallowed. His name and its resonance.

The children are sleeping, safe, only dreaming.
Headlights through uncurtained windows illuminate
the mirror, the tossed sheets. The cottage he built
too close to the highway. She told him that. She hates
the hiss of those cars passing, heading somewhere busy,
perhaps important. She imagines standing there on the verge,
one fist held out, thumb up, begging. From the other hand,
a line of children ascends. She remembers
her son's nightmare: deserted in the mall,
all the lights off, the mannequins moving. "You left me"
he sobs and she strokes his back, the knuckles
of his spine slowly unclenching. In the silence
of her own bed at last, she listens to her breath,
finds comfort also in its steady measure.