LOUISE GLÜCK

LULLABY

My mother’s an expert in one thing:
sending people she loves into the other world.
The little ones, the babies—these
she rocks, whispering or singing quietly. I can’t say
what she did for my father;
whatever it was, I’m sure it was right.
It’s the same thing, really, preparing a person
for sleep, for death. The lullabies—they all say
don’t be afraid, that’s how they paraphrase
the heartbeat of the mother.
So the living slowly grow calm; it’s only
the dying who can’t, who refuse.
The dying are like tops, like gyroscopes—
they spin so rapidly they seem to be still.
Then they fly apart: in my mother’s arms,
my sister was a cloud of atoms, of particles—that’s the difference.
When a child’s asleep, it’s still whole.
My mother’s seen death; she doesn’t talk about the soul’s integrity.
She’s held an infant, an old man, as by comparison the dark grew
solid around them, finally changing to earth.
The soul’s like all matter:
why would it stay intact, stay faithful to its one form,
when it could be free?