

Hill Street

Saturday, spring 1964: the twelve year-old girl sings out loud to the birds, asks what she can do for her country, avoids cleaning her room. Climbing the tree-hidden, gravel-paved road, she comes to a house she hadn't known was there until today. (Cerebral Palsy, Sister Agnes said when she asked for volunteers. Treatment means exercise four times a day. Think the Second Great Commandment. Think the Golden Rule. Think about President Kennedy's inspiring words.) Now, at the top of the hill, the house with white and peeling paint stands small; on the stoop, a cracked clay pot, black-eyed susans blooming. Two knocks and the mother appears – square face, plain, not made-up, frowning at the sun. She pushes stray brown curls behind her ears, lets the girl into the too-warm house. *My son can't take cold*, the mother says. *Here he is*. Halting at the threshold, the girl sees a worn-out couch, one wooden chair, closed yellowed blinds. Next to the chair, a pole lamp, its light centered on a boy on a blanket on the floor. He is small for five – arms and legs tense, held straight. His face is thin, scrubbed clean, his green eyes open, wide and watching. Kneeling close to the boy's left side, the mother motions the girl to his right, shows her what to do. It takes the better part of an hour to move the child's neck, shoulders, elbows, knees, hips, hands, fingers, toes in rhythmic repetition, a sheen of sweat forming on their upper lips, shining on the boy's white brow, scenting the heavy air. The mother hums in time,

talks to the boy like any mother talks to her child –
This will soon be over. You are such a brave boy.
I made you some oatmeal cookies. When they finish,
the girl tells the mother, *I'd like to come back next week.*
Not quite frowning, the mother nods. Black-eyed susans
bloom on the stoop. Walking down to the bottom
of the hill, the girl lets the birds do the singing.