

AMERICAN DEATH

I

Their grief preceded them,
plunked itself down in the room
like an ugly toad,
defying all civility.
The table was set with turkey
and all the trimmings,
as if a surfeit of flesh could placate
the cruel whimsey
of their fair-skinned God.

She was an ordinary girl
in the yearbook photo handed round:
the mouth a bit too wide
for prettiness, but with an abundance
of good will and a generous spirit
which, in the long run,
make up for lack of grace.
The service was taped for the shut-ins
and opened with "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring."
Her mother read portions of the *Velveteen Rabbit*;
A classmate talked of giggling
In back of the library and wept a bit.
The Director of Volunteers at the hospital
recalled one candy-striper
who went beyond the rules;
her valedictorian's speech,
read by the runner-up,
expressed generous hopes for world peace
and the admonition
to live by a vision
larger than oneself.

She was an ordinary girl:
an avid hiker; played flute in the school band,
and was a little more blessed
than some, with parents whose grief
now drove one to excessive speech
and the other to painful, silent gulping.
The only extraordinary thing about her
Was an aorta wall too thin to hold
The rich
 American
 Blood.

II

Rufus was last seen alive
(according to reports)
down at Church's Fried
Chicken on Ninth and Allerton.
Hung out there mostly,
after getting fired;
might have been drugs
he was after, but probably
only a place to hang
til something better
come along.

Nope, his mother
didn't notice him gone that day.
Think she works nights,
sleeps in the afternoon.
Pop? Don't know's he has one.
Guess she's got a loada grief
that woman,
Rufus being her baby.
Fuckin bastards!
didn't have no business
shootin up no
Black man.

III

The sky was its usual
Yellow in La Bermuda
smoking with unnatural fire,
this land of sticky flies
and children gulping hunger,
of black volcanoes
and ruby blood.

A woman—call her Maria,
Marta or Magdalena—
the name doesn't matter,
only notice the decisiveness
of her step,
passing this corner
on her way to work,
thick, dark hair
wrapped around her like a shawl
or shroud,
a sinewy woman:
small, dark, proud,

determined, like her people,
to win.

Eyes focused straight ahead,
looking neither back,
nor down.
she doesn't notice it
lying inelegantly by the curb:
flies clustered round its belly
like honeybees before a hive,
maggots suckling its youthful breast,
and the shell of a U.S. casing
marking the murder
of adolescence.

~ Sheila D. Collins