Prairie Dogs
for Khyber Oser
and in memory of Matthew Shepard (1976–1998)

They tenanted the far high school field,
the dispossessed Lotaburger lot, the dog run.
Shifty, sometimes rabid, they dared to stand

upright, almost human, and stare. I feared their deft hands, the shrug of shoulders before they spiraled underground. That day one hung panting on a twist

of barbed wire; front paws scored the dirt.
A ripped haunch, roiling and bloody, flashed,
and I turned away, yanking the dog behind me,

when my young cousin whispered what’s this, and groped for a stick to free the leg,
and when that didn’t work, he knelt in the trashy run, his face close to the scrabbler, fingers plying the greasy, furred gash, the entrails glazed with flies which might have deterred

someone else, but he sat, now cross-legged,
unwinding the wrecked limb the way the hands that lifted the boy in Wyoming must have worked.
To A Poet  
for Maxine Kumin

You never found comfort in doctrine  
but in the winter  
coats of your horses and in the climbing

tendrils of your beans  
all making their way into the strict lines  
to which I now return

You set the cool spring trail ride on Amanda  
alongside the slaughterer’s  
bullet slamming sidelong

You set the body  
swimming in the pond, mind dissolving  
and shucking off its burden

You let the woman lie down with the bear  
and migrate  
with the arctic caribou  Your anguish

in aligning loss  
with love became metrical protests  
as a gorgeous May

afternoon enters every window of the house  
where someone is sick  
and someone is reading to the sick

and someone makes supper using  
every language available to say nourishment,  
mystery, wisdom,  
and I will sleep on the floor in your room
Hospice

I wanted to believe in it, the word softer than hospital but still not home—

like any other frame house on the street, it had a lawn, a door, a bell—

inside, our friend lay, a view of the garden from her room but no lift to raise her from the bed. A sword, the sun plunged across the cotton blankets.

I wanted dying to be Mediterranean, curated, a villa, like the Greek sanatoria where the ancients cared for their sick on airy porticos and verandas with stone paths that led to libraries. A nurse entered her room and closed the door.

For the alleviation of pain, I praise Morpheus, god of dreams, unlocking the medicine drawer with a simple key, narcotic placed beneath the tongue.

In the hall, the volunteer offered us coffee. How could I think the Mozart in G major we played to distract her could distract her? Or marble sculpture in the atrium?
A Last Go

My mother takes the world into her mouth, she takes the sour-cream coffee cake and the rugelach with walnuts and currants. She wants a pecan raisin loaf, two loaves, See’s suckers, and mandelbrodt, and I’ll take her hunger any way I can, mainlining my mother’s desires, finding in her appetites the young woman—tortoise-shell sunglasses and dark hair pulled back in a silk scarf—who gunned the white Ford Galaxy, hardtop convertible, a ringer for Jackie O. This is her reward for years of tuning deprivation like a violin, of learning to do more on less and less until she lived on argument, solo performance, dry toast and black coffee, the fish dish halved. Now that medical studies show the skinny live longer, she’s gained the sweet taste of being right all along. Go ahead, Ma, try the ginger scones, the lemon poppy seed cake. All the hours you hoarded have turned into years; there’s time for a last go at pleasure.