

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*The Cigarette-Ash Heart*

You were the one  
in the passenger seat  
when the driver nodded off.

When you felt  
the car veering, and  
grabbed the wheel -

the trailer hitch  
fishtailed and flipped,  
taking your car with it.

You were the one  
your girlfriend held  
as you died.

I never met her,  
though you'd been  
together for years.

I'm the one who  
let us grow apart.  
I forgot how to be your friend.

I missed so much.  
Different high schools.  
Different college plans.

You were just headed home  
from a cross-country trip.  
You're supposed to be home now.

I missed your wake.  
and your funeral.  
I found out too late.

Had I been there, I'd have seen  
all your friends — a more diverse cast  
than a TV hospital drama.

You could make friends with  
anyone, at any time, under  
any circumstances.

You lived and breathed  
solidarity, but you were no  
bumper sticker.

I am a bumper sticker.  
A burnt  
right-wing one.

Now you're gone.  
And who's still here?  
Me.

The C.S. Lewis fan.  
The Batman geek.  
The kid in love with Enya.

Can anyone be duller?  
More repressed Catholic,  
suburban Republican?

But God took you.  
If only He had taken me,  
instead. I mean, look at me -

I'm just the sort of  
old-fashioned jackass  
who would call God "He."

The world needs way fewer  
like me; way more like you,  
but God took you and left me.

We all know the names  
of the good people, the ones  
shot trying to caulk a cracked world.

But David Duke will always be with us.  
Pat Robertson will live forever,  
and we will all sleep at the wheel.

God made a mistake  
when He stole you from us.  
The infallible one blew it.

I promise you,  
I will fix it.  
I have to.

People scare me.  
I don't understand them.  
I don't like them.

But that is the old me.  
I need to make a new "me,"  
more like you.

People scare me, but  
I will bleed with them  
when the bullies cut them.

I will speak up because you can't.  
I will say what you would have said.  
And I will silence my own cigarette-ash heart.