

Curling Willow

Elizabeth Spires

for Josephine Jacobsen (1908-2003)

--- *I can still get there if I try*: it's through the glass doors,
then down the long hallway on the left. Inside, it is always
late afternoon, the bucket of ice set out, the cork on the champagne

popping, the martinis shaken but very dry. Your door
slightly ajar, you tried to ignore the cries from across the hall,
Help me, please! Somebody help me! And sometimes an old lady,

without knocking, would wander in, a wild and vacant look in her eyes.
You still wrote poems: about a woman dying, about the news—
bombs, terror, famine, war, disease—until you could bear the news

no longer and the screen went dark forever. You were like a tree,
a winter tree, still bare as spring took hold. You pretended not to mind
as Time unleaved you, stealing away walks, then eyes, then all your friends.

Ingenious, eyes closed, you time-traveled, surprising me
with your near-perfect recall of Keats and Millay, poems you'd learned
by heart as a girl. One day a friend brought you a curling willow,

its bare black branches gnarled as a hand that's lived on and on.
How long did it hold its pose? Two years? Three? It was then
that I began to wonder about it all. Was there a plan? A great design?

Was someone somewhere running the universe? Or was pain simply
random and continual? The last time I saw you there was no champagne
or laughter. A trip was in the offing. You would travel light,

without valise or passport. You had been preparing for a long time.
I held your hand but didn't speak. I wish now I had stayed longer.
And now your room is empty, or worse, filled with a stranger's things.

O where, I want to know, is that curling willow now?