

TIPPET HILL

We pull out of the filling station
and head for the interstate
Aunt Jane looks at me cockeyed
Why do you want to know where Tippet Hill is?

I stammer at the unexpected question
Grandma ...she sometimes told about it

I feel strangely defensive
Why *am* I so interested in my father's people?
Blind fingers like the roots of lilies
probing deeper into the generations
sifting through the layers of the ages
reaching back and back and back

She drives in silence for a while
I am afraid she has forgotten to point it out
Have we passed it yet? I venture
No the word is drawn from the side of her mouth.
Then

I see we are coming up on a ridge
the highway cuts into it and a house sits near the top
There it is, she points
Used to be the highest spot in Central Illinois...
maybe in the state. (See those silos there?
that's where the Heaths settled.)
Some years back they chopped off the top of it for the T.V. tower
They took another chunk
when the highway came through.

Used to be three times as high as it is now.

She drives on and our talk turns to the weather
and the roadside weeds
A neighbor passes us
and waves
It is Les Alexander, her brother's father-in-law

Grandma used to tell
how Anna Porter Heath climbed that hill every morning
to look Eastward for her David
Waiting for his return
She climbed Tippet Hill for forty years after
they brought her the news of his death in Ohio
They said his last words were of her
Anna's waiting in the sunrise
and she was

I am stunned at such faith
the forty year faith of long ago lovers
my grandmother's faith in the old story
As we round the bend I catch a last sight of the hill
In the side mirror
I try to measure where the top would have been
and I am struck with the thought
that Aunt Jane was here before the highway
before the T.V. tower
She must remember Tippet Hill
before
when it stood like a dinosaur on the outwash plain
Maybe she stood at the top once
struggling to hold her own against the high prairie winds

She shakes her head
and I lean forward to catch her words
Used to be three times as high
And I wonder where I will go to meet my dead