

Take It or Leave It

at the dump's swap shed

Mary left a cabinet, took a chair.
Mike took the chair, left an iron skillet.
Robert hauled in a mattress, heaved the guts
of a washing machine onto his pick-up.
Now, a woman too young to look so old
bends over a table heaped with cast-off,
Take-It clothes. Slowly she steps out
of her shoes, removes her purple blouse,
her blue pants. In her underwear,
she could be anyone.

But she's Marguerite whose daughter last month
drove off the bridge, who depends
on sleeping pills and gin, her reputation
for being *a little off*, a police record
of petty offense. I feign interest
in the paperbacks, a ragged copy
of, of all things, *Crime and Punishment*.
We endure a polite silence,
as though sitting in a library reading room.

Finally, empty-handed, the woman turns
from the table. She's so pale, she looks bled.
A safety pin holds up one strap of her bra.
Here, her lined face and flat eyes say,
is what I want to take: bad news
happening in some distant place.
Let me leave sleepless nights,
take finding my way in the dark,
leave suicidal water, take control at the wheel.
A change in name, a different
shake of the dice, and what is mine, her eyes say,
could've been hers.

She doesn't care that she violates
the swap shed's rituals of voluntary exchange,
how I don't want to claim
this burdensome unease her naked slouch
and sagging breasts demand.
Nor can I offer the right words to explain
I'm not blind to her longing
to disown, to dump heartache and cruel chance,
hoping that in the morning,
they'll be hauled away like trash.