

Airborne

The only time I ever danced with my father
was in a little grey crab shack with a piano in the corner
on a pier that jutted out over black bayou water.
The piano player was so wall-eyed, my father said
he didn't know whether to laugh at him or cry—
a feeling I thought he'd always had about me.
But when that wall-eyed man's fingers rolled over those keys
and he leaned way back on that piano stool
and Fats Domino's voice, almost perfect,
like on the record I'd heard a million times,
rolled out of his wide mouth,
my father stopped still, and something like
a year's hard going melted away,
and for a minute I could only look at him
from the corners of my eyes, like a girl in love.
He didn't drum the oilcloth with his fist
or pound his boot on the cracked linoleum floor
but when that caddywhumpus-staring, piano-playing
Fats-singing man struck up "Walkin' to New Orleans"
he held out his hand to me,
his clumsy, nearsighted oldest girl, and
showed me how to do the stroll, and
we strolled across that checkered floor and
strolled on out that crab shack door and
strolled on off the end of that pier and
strolled out over that black water and
for two minutes and thirteen seconds
I danced with my father on air.

They pulled Fats off his roof the other day
in the wake of that damned hurricane.
My father's big body lies buried in his dress blues
in a neat little graveyard, ill-suited to wailing and carrying on.
The crab shack fell into the bayou, and I
have old knees, that protest the rocking rhythm of the stroll.
God knows where the player or the piano have gone,
and air won't hold what it used to.
And this particular kind of lonely is hard,
but there's still joy in it—
joy for Fats and
joy for the piano and
joy for two minutes and thirteen seconds of
Walkin' to New Orleans, on air.