

## As If She Were Close

My mother is chasing me. All over the house.  
No. This is not a nightmare. It happened.  
Thirty or so years ago. She is waving an  
empty cigarette packet I'd neatly opened up  
to expose a blank writing surface. This is where  
I wrote my first poem. A knot of gritty phrases  
about war in Vietnam or Iwo Jima.  
I can't remember where, but I'd dropped it  
or thrown it away and forgotten about it:  
my spider pencil crawl of a treatment;  
a Sunday afternooner, a black and whiter.  
The kind my mother liked, as long as Garfield  
or Cagney starred. But my poem has no stars.  
Just a blunt jungle of men killing each other  
in childish, thrilling ways. She finally catches  
me, arms crossed like a corpse under her bed.  
*John! It's very, very good! You wrote a poem!*

I'm seven or eight years old, and I know  
whatever the thing I've done, it has a power  
to frighten, a frightening power. One to shunt  
aside until years after she's dead. Where I find  
myself in the departure lounge at Heathrow,  
waiting to connect as my American bosses say.  
My slim ticket ready in my hand, and hours  
to kill before boarding. And it begins again.  
A full thirty years since I nipped it in the bud.  
As if she were close. I'm writing a poem about  
my mother in the space on the back of the card.  
Something very simple about us walking along  
the quays on the long way home from the auction  
she used to love. It's straightforward, honest, plain.  
But there's a powerful feeling, too. Like my heart  
is physically moving to the wrong side of my chest  
where it should not be. And the bloody thing makes  
me cry. God damn it, but I can't stop writing it now.  
I keep going on with it, on and on. What else can I do?