I once brushed by a man in a blue cotton shirt
and he sighed in wordless longing and reached
as if to catch me. I pretended then to be invisible,
as I truly am now, pushing my hair into silken masses
then letting it go, letting it go.
Before I disappeared, there was a party
where I poured *grand cru*, teasing other women’s
husbands till they were silly with delight;
there were turquoise boxes tied up with pale ribbon
and a ramshackle hut on a cliff at Big Sur,
drenched in moonlight. A clumsy hand traced silvered
shadows along my naked hip, before I vanished
like fragrance, like fog. There were armloads of scarlet
roses, orchids like furled moths, a black spangled
dress, and glossy chocolates from Geary Street,
when I could still be seen. A man draped a web
of coruscating stones against my throat
and lingered on the pulse, fingers thick
with desire. This cloak of night,
this umbral shield, was not my first magic.
Once I held a boy against my breasts as he raged
and released him, gentled like an old dog,
that grateful. When men could still see me,
I tapped nails like painted shells against
a compact of mother of pearl, I felt the hot
stroke of eyes against my taut skin,
when I could still be seen.
We’ve stared too long into a cracked looking glass, or rubbed a clean spit spot on the black brass lamp or opened the wrong cupboard and tumbled into this strange place, the five of us, our sister bobbing her gray pigtails and barking orders, our brothers feckless and charming, bad knees and grizzled beards making them at the same time the callow boys and the wise professors of the stories we read so long ago, the ones who knew the secrets of the cupboard, how to escape the enchantment, how to live a whole life, then make it home with no time passed. And there’s our littlest, solemn still, pear-shaped and owlish, pointing out landmarks as we navigate this cold land. We’re in charge, finally—all our wishes granted: What we like for supper, and cursing aloud, and some nights, no bedtime at all; we sprawl about putting cigarettes out in half-drunk foreign beers, like grown-ups. Our father is dying, our sister shrieks. But there are cards to play and debts to pay and numbers don’t add up right here. Our shadows are shapeless. I can’t think what comes next. The little wants a story; that’s my job, even here, so I call them close and hand around sweets, wishing the boys would do something clever with hairpins and sealing wax, but they’re slack-jawed, too, and waiting. I take her little hand in mine.

A long time ago, a long time ago, I huddled at the bus stop, a nickel clutched in one cold fist, but as each bus slowed I waved it away; it cost a dime to ride. The wind whipped my plaid skirt and chafed my cheeks and when the sun began to slide beneath the skyline, outlining the church

Anna Scotti

The Five Children and It

The children stood round the hole in a ring, looking at the creature they had found. . . . Its eyes were on long horns like a snail’s eyes, and it could move them in and out like telescopes; it had ears like a bat’s ears, and its tubby body was shaped like a spider’s and covered with thick soft fur.

—E. Nesbit, Five Children and It (1905)
in melting gold, I heard a faint cry and turned, and
there was our mother, arms open, coat
flapping, and she
was calling
my name
Last night you came to me, barefoot,  
nightgown damp and twisted with sleep,  
and said you’d lost a thing with four rooms  
and no doors. *That’s easy,* I said. *Your heart.*

Last night you turned, pushing the dark  
from your eyes with both fists—I’m calling and  
calling but only my own voice answers—and I  
smoothed the blankets around you and whispered  
*echoes on water, feathers of gold.* Last night  
you muttered, *an acorn, a chestnut,* and *many eyes,*  
*but cannot see,* and I knew that you would cry  
out, still trembling from dreams of sphinxes  
and corridors, deserts and breath. *Hush,* I told  
you. *Never. Forever. The ocean. I will.*