

**Karl Plank**

**GRAVE STONES**

*In memory of Nelle Clayton Boyette*

In a year of shuddering  
I tell myself:

Study the rock from which you came  
the stones that rise  
from the ground

in the churchyard at Sharon  
the double-arched marker of twin daughters  
who survived 3 days and 6 days in 1852—

*The first grave in this cemetery—*

and to its right the remains of a child  
who lived  
one month in the spring of 1862.

Here lie the bones of the twins' father  
who took his life in 1866—  
*Gone to rest*, his monument says—

and of the mother who worked  
without rest until 1909.  
*Give her of the fruit of her hands*

her children chiseled in rock  
to record her resolve, remembering  
her left arm

was stump-ended from birth.  
*The fruit of her hand*  
it might have read.

When young, Aunt Nelle  
would go to Eliza's corner  
at the right of the fireplace

to watch her grandmother

sew petticoats with lace borders,  
the cloth clasped by a *little bird*

*that worked like a spring clothespin*  
*fastened on the candle stand.*  
She pinned the other end to her dress

and brought *the little arm under*  
*like quilting*. The little arm, *it was strong*,  
she noted

in a letter to my mother  
confessing *I could tell you more clearly*  
*than I can write it.*

And now, over the chasm of years,  
I reply  
to tell myself:

these words  
penned on paper  
bring back the lost

or carved in rock  
mark what was  
and what is not.

They stitch  
the vanishing trace  
with golden thread.

It might be enough  
to hold  
the living

the living, that is,  
in the hand  
of the dead.

