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from *The Ladies*

In the empty space between sound and color we ran reckless through the prospect. Kept still. We walked towards each other with our hands outstretched like sleepwalkers. We pretended to be murdered, our bodies flat on the ground and our arms in angles like police outlines. Mornings, we collected leaves off the lawn. Everything was dying.

We plunged into the hollow. It was already nostalgic, this time of blue and bright and damp hands on the railings.

We were scared to death, dead tired, dead cold, dead broke, a dead duck. We were red shifted. We donned a wooden overcoat. We were drop dead gorgeous and dying to meet you. We nearly died, we were to die for. It was do or die, and we chucked the last nickel at the bridge. We were working the graveyard shift, we were turning over in our graves, it was quiet as a tomb, we were white as a ghosts, and like shocks of corn fully ripened, we came to our coronations and we were afraid we would never die.

We worried most about it at the age of ten, but at age 17, we read about immortality and the feeling returned. It was unbearable. We simply could not endure it. Better to have total annihilation, anything, than this continual going on and on.

We were unable to stop, we couldn't avoid it. We were unable to stop in time. We were warned. Everyone seemed to know what was going to happen. Oh, you shouldn't go out there. Oh, it's terrible out there. Oh, you'd better be careful. Oh, you're gonna end up getting dragged out of a ditch. You're gonna fly off that bridge. You're gonna end up at the bottom of the river. Don't call me when you're stuck. Don't you dare call me. I'll just tell you I told you so.

But we stepped on the gas. We were all over. We stepped on the brakes. Gas the swerve into everything they told us. And being unable. Everything that happened was invisible. Everything that happened was already.

Our car a truck our car the other car our car covered our car in the middle turned around our car backed into skidded over too fast the bridge and then the windshield a warning an approach without intention we were learning to stop the road the sudden appearance of the wrong way power of the weather power where no one should go without warning headed wheel to wheel no one ever appeared that way tumbling over the embankment thought we were out the windows thought we had been the windows the thing we found ourselves in what we saw was a different direction what we saw was a corner a signal it couldn't be missed and we missed it we were thrown we ran so fast we knew we were running so fast but it felt slow out of the road into the wet into the wrong house we were wrong moving sad in the ditch in the water and facing the way to say it a stray tree it moved into our path like it had legs we were off the hood all day we wondered when we bobbed in the same place for weeks for months we were waiting we waited years for someone to come we waited our whole lives we were down there we saw everything happen except for how to get up and falling several times we reached our hands our sleep intersected with wheels and it was always dark there no one to blame we were told we were thinking how we would explain up for the

taking but we were like canaries and our little car our gilded cage we would never have got loose from we flew differently when trouble began we were caused to move too quickly we told everyone we knew no injuries fine everything fine but we knew better beneath our hats our skulls were slipping

Most things never actually happen. We were born and now we are alive. We continued living and it was a dark night on the road. Cold and the weather was bad. We continued living even after that. We dug out. We got dragged out. Our captors came and we didn't understand at first. It was alarming. We were taken out and then somewhere else and now we must attend.

It's as if we made a pact without knowing it. All our shame to pay for. All the ways life makes you ashamed and the way you must pay for it. You can't just turn out the lights. You can't just understand how life works. You can't call the day into being. You can't beat it out of us. We won't know what to tell you. Stop it. Stop it right now. There's nothing wrong with you. Stop it. Stop it and sit down. Sit down or I'll give you something to cry about.

We didn't know the deceased, but we had dreamed about her. This woman was always alone. She was waiting for something that never arrived. It was unclear in the dream what it was she was waiting for, but it seems it was probably a lover. A man. Someone she did not know, whom she'd only met once. Perhaps there was a refusal on her part that she regretted and was too shy to reach out after. So she lived in possibility for a while, going places she thought he might be, lingering at a table for hours, nursing a glass of something bitter. Perhaps this man, whom she'd only met once, had forgotten, or disappeared, or moved away, or was run over by a herd of elk. The possibilities of his demise were endless. But she knew the truth, even if she didn't want to admit it: that while there was something about her that was initially appealing, upon further investigation, there was also something about her that was repulsive.

In the dream we did not see her weep, but we did see her collect stones and place them into boxes. At night, she took the stones from their boxes and tied them in a large blanket and placed it on her chest. The weight was comforting. It reminded her she took up space.

Everyone wants to die in their own way. If you ask, you'll get many answers, but most will have this in common: it should be quick and it should be easy and it should be painless. There shouldn't be any suffering. I don't want to suffer, they'll say. They say, I would like to die very quickly, unexpectedly. By fire, by ice, by drowning, by accident, by another's hand, by falling, by poison, by rope, by knife, by turning a corner and losing my breath. I'd like to die in a way where the light just slowly dims, but abruptly, without warning. Where I'm in bed surrounded by my loved ones in a white room in a small house by the sea, and no one knows it's the end but everyone's there, just as a coincidence. I'd like to die in a car when I'm seventeen. I'd like to be on a motorcycle or a horse. I'd like to be on my bicycle and suddenly sideswiped. I'd like to be attacked by dogs, by swans, by a gang of thugs. I'd like my lover to do it. I'd like him to hold my hand, stroke my hair, tell me he'll see me soon, and then shoot me in the heart. I'd like to die while eating mint chocolate chip ice cream, while eating a steak, sushi, a plate of fries. I'd like to be struck by lightning, taken up in a tornado, flung out to sea by a hurricane. I'd like to overdose. I'd like to throw myself off a bridge. I'd like to be sitting at my desk by the window at sunrise. I'd like to be dreaming, asleep. I'd like to die in my sleep. I don't care where or when or how, I just know I don't want to be alone.

Another family, another landscape, another act of contrition. The flickers will yell and fly overhead. The cars will age as they drive down the highway, as if the past were dust, as if the past could become solid, a silent visitor who presses into the chest. Each of us hold a palm over their hearts, in order to keep the vibration closer, in order to say “we are so sorry for your loss.”

Arriving early, we walk the grounds. A fallow field. A split-rail fence. The sky big and heavy. A woman stands near a small herb garden going to seed. She stands very still, her hands to her sides, her pale pink coat flapping in the wind against her calves, her pocketbook under her arm. She stands and a heavy flog floats low. Slowly, it begins to make a circle around her and split her body in two. Her head becomes severed. It hovers. It begins to drift away from her and everything turns dark as it moves.



Our hunger becomes insatiable. We cannot stop. We finish a sandwich and want soup. We finish the soup and want chicken. We finish the chicken and want cake and frosting and bacon and Swiss cheese and figs and mortadella and green beans and peaches and coffee cake and potatoes with gravy and carrots cut into tiny matchsticks and noodles with shrimp and baklava and fried eggs and a salad of watercress and mint and a salad of arugula and apples and a salad of spinach and walnuts and various kinds of pizzas and various kinds of pastries and French fries and toast and lentils and squash and the table will never hold it all, the table will collapse under the weight of all this.

This is how everything is. We were in the water and then we weren't. No one to bear witness or to mark the time. No one to take a photograph. And how would that happen anyway? You can't take a picture of what you're thinking. You can never do that.

There is no way for us to be like other people. Our task is given.

And the window frame rattles from the passing train our lives have become, a train crossing towns and counties and rivers and we watch from the window how the wilderness blurs, how the deep green blackens and grays, how roads and rivers and figures become rapid and swift in their standstill.

There were times we thought we could become something else, when we forgot our given task, when we forgot ourselves. In these moments, which were brief and infrequent, we were mirthful, we were birdlike, we squawked as we ran around our rooms cluttered with fabric and bells, but then the shift would happen, the wall would give way for example, and we were confronted with the dark and the nearness of daybreak, the work of the Earth roiling around on its axis moving towards frost, moving towards heat, the seasons offering their deception, giving the impression that with a change in weather, there would be a change in us too. And it was comforting to think so for a while. But then the river would churn forth ice and just as quickly fall prey to insects and overrunning its banks. When the river runs high, any amount of rain is dangerous. When the river begins, you cannot stop it.

The drums beat in time to the walkers who fill the streets and we walk too. We propel ourselves forward within the funerary rush. We hold our hats to our heads and bow down to the wind coming through hard and hot.

We must go again. Out into the world. Again, to the dark rooms where they lie. We go to them.