

The Dead and the Living

Poems by

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Grandmother Love Poem

Late in her life, when we fell in love,
I'd take her out from the nursing home
for a chaser and two bourbons. She'd crack
a joke sharp as a tin lid
hot from the teeth of the can-opener,
and cackle her crack-corn laugh. Next to her
wit, she prided herself on her hair,
snowy and abundant. She would lift **it** up
at the nape of the neck, there in the bar,
and under the white, under the salt-and-
pepper, she'd show me her true color,
the color **it** was when she was a bride:
like her sex in the smoky light she would show me
the pure black.

Best Friends

(for Elizabeth Ewer, 1942-51)

The day my daughter turned ten, I thought of the
lank, glittering, greenish cap of your
gold hair. The last week of
your life, when I came each day after school,
I'd study the path to your front door,
the bricks laid close as your hairs. I'd try to
read the pattern, frowning down
for a sign.

The last day—there was not
a mark on that walk, not a stone out of place—
the nurses would not let me in.

We were nine. We had never mentioned death
or growing up. I had no more imagined
you dead
than you imagined me
a mother. But when I had a daughter
I named her for you, as if pulling you back
through a crack between the bricks.

She is ten now, Liddy.

She has outlived you, her dark hair gleaming like
the earth into which the path was pressed,
the path to you.

My Father Snoring

Deep in the night, I would hear it through the wall—
my father snoring, the great, dark
clotted mucus rising in his nose and
falling, like coils of seaweed a wave
brings in and takes back. The clogged roar
filled the house. Even down in the kitchen,
in the drawers, the knives and forks hummed with that
distant throbbing. But in my room
next to theirs, it was so loud
I could feel myself inside his body,
lifted on the knotted rope of his life
and lowered again, into the narrow
dark well, its amber walls
slick around my torso, the smell of bourbon
rich as sputum. He lay like a felled
beast all night and sounded his thick
buried stoppered call, like a cry for
help. And no one ever came:
there were none of his kind around there anywhere.

Burn Center

When my mother talks about the Burn Center
she's given to the local hospital
my hair lifts and wavers like smoke
in the air around my head. She speaks of the
beds in her name, the suspension baths and
square miles of lint, and I think of the
years with her, as her child, as if
without skin, walking around scalded
raw, first degree burns over ninety
percent of my body. I would stick to doorways I
tried to walk through, stick to chairs as I
tried to rise, pieces of my flesh
tearing off easily as
well-done pork, and no one gave me
a strip of gauze, or a pat of butter to
melt on my crackling side, but when I would
cry out she would hold me to her
hot griddle, when my scorched head stank she would
draw me deeper into the burning
room of her life. So when she talks about her
Burn Center, I think of a child
who will come there, float in water
murky as tears, dangle suspended in a
tub of ointment, suck ice while they
put out all the tiny subsidiary
flames in her hair near the brain, and I say
Let her sleep as long as it takes, let her walk out
without a scar, without a single mark to
honor the power of fire.