

# **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.