

How the dead will hound you.
Some people might rather go on unbothered
Quartet
Right there is the grassy knoll

How the dead will hound you.

It's not fair how the dead will hound you
yet the living can't get your attention.
How the dead will come around
to visit
quite unannounced,
will leave their remains, their belongings behind
where even if you get rid of it all
you'll discover it when you look for an earring
a spool of thread a fresh pair of candles for the mantel,
how you'll even see the dead in your bathroom mirror.

But pick up the phone and call your mother your sister
or anyone
and mostly you'll avoid
the hard things—
Not that the dead do much talking
but they'll listen to anything.
Oh they listen alright.
Somehow.

Because the workings of the dead
are largely unknown, as yet unfathomed.
What easy rest it must be for those without expectation
of an afterlife a reappearance
a repurposed
soul.
Who's even dead, really? Is anyone gone for good?
And certainly, doesn't everything just everything revolve
around the threat the fear the imminence
of not having the final word?
Of dying,
such as it is.

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in a sort of pleasant trance of repetition
A pattern—
one day after another
the rhythm of life, perhaps.

No more, no less than asked,
no more, no fewer than required,
leaving adventure to the explorers,
invention to the clever, fortune to the lucky.
Leaving crime and filth to the disturbed.

—Leaving people like me
wondering what to talk about at lunch
other than the movie star who
cut her hair.

While the integrity of nouns and verbs
and the importance of apostrophes and commas,
wooden doors and plaster walls,
clotheslines and couplets
is at stake.

While concern for cedar shingles that could be revived,
and plastic fences that will soon be in landfills,
children who never draw after age ten,
and schools with new football jerseys but no money for books
is dismissed without a proper appointment.

While there are people who have no time to
paint sunflowers and sunsets—
and there are windows that never open, blinds that stay shut,
houses that can't breathe,
and a criminal lack of shade trees.

While workdays are too long for a life—
While there are bosses

and hierarchies and
a religion called
The Chain of Command,
called Capital Gains and Gross Domestic Product.

All this, leaving people like me to wonder—
Why must *impact* replace *affect*
when it's not a better verb.
What makes trees a nuisance.
What will we do when the sea swallows our beach—

What will we do.

How is it that anyone can get lucky
when the chances are so slim.
Why is there no news between greeting cards
and tragedy.

Why is the longing for normal so strong.

How is it that museums even remain
when we've turned to tests and television to satisfy us.
We check art and poetry off the list
after we tell the kids about
sunflowers and starry nights
and walking by woods.

But who will paint our battle stories.
Who will hear our bloody bodies.

Who will stand up to
vinyl-covered neighborhoods and styrofoam cars.
Who will stand up to the abandonment of profitless skills.
Who will stand up for the skilled who can't be employed,
the curious who can't be commanded.

Who will stand up to
the sea when it swallows our sunflowers,
our trees, all our commas and disinterest and unconcern.
Who will be left with words enough to save
mere apostrophes.

Quartet

1-

I'm five years old in the kitchen of a big and drafty house with the transistor radio playing Petula Clark singing *Downtown* and Nancy Sinatra singing *These Boots are Made For Walking*. Every day I hope for these songs to play again.

2-

I'm in the third grade and it's time for Show-and-Tell—I have the Hawaii Five-O theme on a 45. The teacher likes it so much she lets us play it the whole class long, again and again, and everyone is happy.

3-

I'm eleven. My sister and I are in front of the record player handing albums back and forth, studying the covers—Michael Jackson's smile and his afro, Cher's long black hair, We're gorging on *Got to Be There* and *Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves*.

4-

I'm a senior in high school and I've cut my frizzy hair short. I want to be New Wave—I listen to Devo and The Knack and Blondie, I wear safety pins in my ears sometimes. I've discovered black. I'm about to blow this town.

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It was closer than I imagined; it was right there, in fact, to my right, or maybe it was my left, and not only was it right there beside me, I didn't know that day that I would see the grassy knoll because that wasn't why I went to Dallas, Texas, but I was in Dallas, Texas for a conference, and in a cab on the way from the convention center, or to the convention center, maybe, I don't exactly remember, when the cab driver said *Right there is the grassy knoll*, and he didn't say another word about it, assuming we in his cab would know what he meant by *Right there is the grassy knoll*, which we did, and then we talked of nothing but the grassy knoll for the rest of the ride—when we first heard of the grassy knoll, where we were, or where our parents told us they were, or that it happened when we were young and the story was still very fresh and painful for a long, long time, and why would such a thing happen, and what about the Oliver Stone movie—was any of it true or was it nothing but a conspiracy theory, and how the grassy knoll was certainly closer than we all pictured it would be, I mean, it was right there, right there beside us, and even though we came to Dallas, Texas without a single thought of the grassy knoll, and even though to this day, when I think of Dallas, Texas, I think of getting the flu in Dallas—I think it was from my dirty, airless hotel room—and I was worried I wouldn't make it home alive—I really did think that; that's how bad my flu was—I don't think of the grassy knoll so much as I do that flu that almost killed me, or at least it felt that way when I was in bed for two weeks and so sick that I said to call the priest, that's how bad that flu I caught in Dallas, Texas was, but I have a place in my mind where the grassy knoll lies waiting for me to think of it, waiting for me to remember it, I guess, waiting to ask me why I always think of the deadly flu I caught before I think of the grassy knoll when someone mentions *Dallas, Texas*.