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A Sequence for My Mother

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A Sequence for My Mother · *Jan Heller Levi*

Formal Feeling

After a great pain, a formal feeling comes—
—Emily Dickinson

I

September. The rabbi didn't know her.
All day I expect her, look for her in every room.
I have so much to tell her now.

Orange strands from the carpet cling to my feet.

Where is she?
Where is she?

2

Now let me tell you about minutes of lead,
the color blue. Blue is the color of her
fingernails, her lips, my father's wet eyes.
Blue is the color of some other world I insist
she sees. Blue is their language, their children,
their future, dissolving.

Now let me tell you what we can tell the dying:
nothing.

Now let me tell you about a kingdom, about transformations,
about a healing, about a radio turned full volume
for which she would not turn her head.

8:40. 8:41.

I begin the slow, proud walk into motherless America.

3

October. Now I dream
dreams of perfect love and almost understand her.
She is the river
upon whose separate banks my father and I appear,
mouthing the words to a standard tragedy.

During the day I walk with ghosts—
all women, all ages,
all her.
She is everywhere.

Where is she?

4

In wood, in vault, in Baltimore.
Please omit flowers.
They say it will be a cold winter, colder than last.
I have her coat.

My Father's Wedding

Then the moment
slips away from you, an unanswered prayer.
Your father takes you aside,
throws his heavy arm across your shoulder,
tells you everything he thinks you want to know:
I'll never love like that again, but. . .

A year ago, from California,
you called your radioactive mother,
came home in time
to watch her turn blue at the ends and die.
Now, back in New York,
the telephone rings

and you stop imagining,
for a moment,
the novel of grief and redemption
you should have written last year,
or the year before.

It was all right, it was
lovely, you tell your friends who predicted
depression, or the black tongue of anger,
but nothing like this cool breeze,
this clean page
of nothing.

After Her Death

1 *I Lie Awake Listening to Ken's Breathing*

For weeks my heart has been camping out.
He shifts, the down quilt slides
across our bodies, we curve into one another.
Dear friend, sleep-as-conversation,
witness.

2 *The Father Goes Out on Dates*

In these, my father and mother are divorced.
I am an angry teenager and live
with my father.
I visit my mother.
We sit at an unfamiliar table, beautiful
in its strangeness.
(Our hands are the same. They are *her* hands.)
Outside the window, trees.

At first I am worried about her:
how will she live alone?
Soon I realize she is happy with her new life.

3 *The Father Remarries*

And this is death's gift-dream to me:

She comes back.

We all sit in a small room,
chattering, embarrassed.

Sara kisses my father.

My mother lowers her eyes.

Her lashes are dark, soft, almost wet.

She who all her life angered me by obsequiousness
stuns me now with this gesture.

4 *If We Could Speak to Death, What Would We Say?*

(I have come to His press conference, or

He is a guest on a TV talk show.

There are questions from the audience.)

There is so much I want to say:

that death is political;

that it is necessary;

that it is unnecessary;

that it follows me all the days of my life;

that it is my life;

 I eat it,

 I drink it,

 I breathe it;

that I dream and undream it;

that it is the unspeakable space between myself and others;

and that it is the soft black cushion, like velvet, upon which we all rest;

that we have infringed too far on God's authority

and this is his last remaining power over us;

that there is no God;

 that the sun rises in cancer;

 I wake from cancer;

 I brush my cancer;

I wash my cancer;
I put on my cancer;
I sit at my cancer;
I write my cancer;
I am married to cancer;
I meet my friends in cancer;
that the sun sets in cancer;
that through a tunnel of blue light, I hear
the silence of the dead,
and this is music;
that across a wide river, I cannot see
the shadow of myself,
but know it is there, and this
is poetry:
not beauty, not order, not burden, not legislation, but
consciousness,
the dream of dreams,
the only connection between fathers and daughters,
generations,
the woman rocking you to sleep
and the woman who sleeps.
(I say: How is my mother? Does she need anything?)