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Fishpond

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Fishpond · *Fleda Brown Jackson*

—for *Judith Calhoun*

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Tom brought the table centerpieces—fishbowls with two
goldfish each—and floated the bowls in his new pond

to get the fish used to the difference. The little fountain,
the lights, the floating bowls made wonderful ponds

inside the pond. At midnight we helped him dump the fish,
watched them spread around. We had our champagne

and strawberries, his daughter gone on her honeymoon.
There was the pond where grass had been, a whole added

dimension. In the morning it would bring the sky into it.
At midnight, then, we were staring into his new water

together, getting into the details, twelve lily pads,
a million gnats. I was remembering Nana's fishpond with

my handprint in cement, the hand now chipped away,
on a shelf somewhere. How my real hand felt to scoop into

the swarming mass of polliwogs. I was feeling the scariness
of things—weddings, and Tom's delicate heart. Tom, embarrassed

by his joy, said, *So now we've got this fishpond
in the yard, useless as a scene in a paperweight, and all

these fish to feed.* But then he said, *Don't they look
like little jewels, coasting out of reach?*

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I move the tall chair out of the way, pull the other
over, take the cushion out—what did he want so much

height for? I begin typing his obituary in his room,
in the heat, remembering the five w's, the inverted pyramid.

I look at his bed to get started, the bed where this
morning we found him firm and growing mottled, from whence

we sent him off with last rites. *Stay with it*, I tell
myself. Today I am floating. I go back to last night's

table, blue napkins in red napkin rings, the good
food Judith drove all the way to the Italian market

to get for us: asparagus, artichokes, fettucini with
prosciutto, goat's cheese on melba toast, bowl of olives.

Fountain dripping, waterfall in the new pool. It could
have been the Mediterranean, light descending on us all.

He might have felt some change in the tone of his body.
He kept bringing up his friend Bob's death, what it

means to die with dignity. But he seemed as much
alive as ever, Emma Kirkby on the CD and Tom thinking

out loud. What he said was, *I don't believe it means
fully dressed or in control, as opposed to naked*

*and incontinent. It means, I guess, that you accept
what's going on with you.* I might have felt a certain

leaning toward consummation of the scene. I'm not sure.
We were weighing things we see and cannot see. I imagine

Tom late in the night, moving into his dream hours,
he and Bob—musicians superimposed—conducting a

piece for rapid eye movement, then the crescendo
of the body as it decides to let go,—this is the part

I don't understand at all—to let the blood settle back so
the mind can coast ahead, suffuse itself into silence.

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I keep coming back to this. He's lying on the navy sheet
on his back, head to one side, left arm up, right

down, the way I sleep sometimes. Blood collects in
blue splotches on his face and arms, the skin itself cool

and soft over the dread firmness, still beyond still.
There is his lamp, crooked for reading,

his books above his bed, khaki pants over a chair.
Poor books, poor pants, surrounded by a new and absolute

privacy, except for me this evening, picking through
his résumé, getting what I need to organize his life in

five or six paragraphs, and oh lord, his clock goes off!
He must have set P.M. by accident. The maudlin

clock's been placed a few feet out of reach
of the blank bed, blanket folded, pillows stacked.

A week ago, the wedding. And the deck was finished
off his room, a place to watch the pond, the lights

caught in the trees. Last night that's what we did.
I kissed his cheek before I left, not mentioning

his surgery two days ahead, glancing away from
his fear. *I'll be thinking about you, she said*

euphemistically is what I did come out with, as if
we were characters in a book. Stupid way to put it!—I am

ill-prepared, like a child, having to imagine him
somewhere, rising into clouds, the same Tom, but rosy

with relief, loving us all with the slightly
detached attention of one who knows everything now.

The mind lifts off from the corpse. No wonder
there's a heaven to receive the words we meant to say.

Well, Tom, you were a good and funny man, and we are all
good in the plain workings of our bodies—soundly

made and vulnerable. You were also petulant
and sometimes cruel: so do we all suffer each other's

suffering. I keep making you dead, trying to hold
your body still to imagine it a dozen times a day,

your body on the sheet, crossing over, having crossed,
having left this world, ferried in my thoughts,

not reaching a conclusion, emerging from the haze
to strike a characteristic pose, sometimes holding

your Martin guitar, singing “Maggie,” sometimes
watching your lit pond from the deck. I get a partial

gesture. It is moving as I am moving. I am feeling
the soft shore under me, made of simple earth and water.