

70

By Patricia Smith

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Well, first, it seems immeasurably unjust
that no one clues you to this bombshell—you
will lose your pubic hair! No one brought up
this grave development, the swift *début*
of silver slowly turning soulless gray,
then just an anarchy of wire, 'til one
by one your glistening strands betray
you, disengage and drift. Behold and lo,
you're bald in undreamt ways. My perfumed kink
and curl, dense lace embellishing the door
to everything, no longer shines its light
for episodic visitors. I own
a home not quite abandoned, simply stripped,
the fireplace still ablaze within its walls.

I'm shamed by how much satisfaction I
experience when I scan random crowds
and whisper *Everyone I see will die*.
The difference now is that I'm well aware
that I'm included. If I shut my eyes
to sleep, to hush this drowsy body down
because the world is swirling, when I wake
I'm just a little farther underground.
And, yes, I'm terrified, and so are you,
admit it. Someone said you die and just
relive the life you've lost, again, again,
again, with all its woe and wounds. *That's hell*.
I think I'd rather ceaselessly relive
that godforsaken hour before I die.

I mourn the many poems that I failed
to write, and then those poems that I failed—

the poems I assumed would shove a life
back into life, unlatch a cage or turn
a thousand thirsty bullets back around,
revive a fallen daddy, shrink a war,
unreeling lines I thought could heal a thing,
slam shut a thing, reverse a thing, or teach
an Annie Pearl to love her reckless child.
I grieve the lawless verses that fought back
and silenced me because I lacked the spine
required to know the tale they told was mine.
I trusted myself blind. I really thought
the words would grow to gospel in my hands.

And back to death again. It hovers, smirks,
and rides that vile McRib right to my mouth
and down. It's eying me. Who'll greet me at
the gates? A God? No God? I've seen the hope—
resuscitated Woofs and Fluffys, kin
now tumorless and gleeful, those
who raised you younger than they ever were
all hauling ass through Heaven toward you.
My daddy, with his glinting golden mouth,
and Brady Bear my Berner, Ron the mutt,
and, yes, my mother, maybe with a heart
that works. This Hallmark paradise does
what a blindfold does—you crave a light
that isn't there until it is. It's not.

But what about the rampant blaze that scars
that other place? Incendiary claws
that fight to pull you down? Most poets swear
they've been to Hell, prefer the place because
there's no gap left for silence, there's no time
to muse, regret, revise, or wonder what
you've done or haven't, just the bellowing

of flames that shift your skin. The baying of
Beelzebub begins and keeps beginning.
But I suspect this too is trickery—
a candy dangled, daring poets near.
We don't mind fire if there's a tale attached.
But what of me, whose greatest fear is dirt
and silence? What if now is what there is?

For what must be the thousandth time, I watch
the shudder-hipped industrious machine that is
Beyoncé's body and it's like I'm on
another planet. When you're 70,
it's best to file that under "Kiss my old
decrepit ass" and go about your biz.
So what's life like? Let's see. I move,
a sound comes out—a yowl, a groan, a pained
unwinding hiss. Or, if it's just my knee
again, a scream that freaks the birds outside.
My neck is prone to locking, and my eyes
can only work behind a nerdy chunk
of thick prescription glass. And, oops, it's time
to wind this sonnet down, but there is soooo

much left to gripe about, so let's proceed.
I stare at my reflection, and I see
my melody is waning—no surprise,
but only blues take root and hold. I spot
inside myself the girl who never was
less than a dance, who loved her daddy like
a god. I wallow in my history
because there's just so goddamned much
of it. And then I wonder if I've done
enough. Or anything. I ponder that
until I have to sit and catch my breath.
Oh, hallelujah all this old. It's what

I've done. I write, I love, I break apart.
I wrote. I loved. I broke apart.

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