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The Professor
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If I should die
in this sterile bed
think not this of me,
me paging listlessly
through one of those magazines that eddy
as flotsam here.
Let me be found
not with an expired glossy
slippery, over my cavernous chest
a surreal bust and brilliant white teeth
arched, grinning
or, perhaps seeming clenched
as if she knew of the skeleton stretched beneath her.
Instead, when the monotone
drops from beating,
beating,
ceases.
Find me with Beckett or Barnes,
Whitman or Woolf.
Rather than Judy pronouncing justice,
let there be silence
in this corner of a hospital wing,
or, if you must,
let a fly buzz.

Judy, of course, is ubiquitous
elbowing around corners,
there when I've dozed and the nurses come through.
Perhaps others are comforted
by the theme with variation?
Black robes and white jackets.
Red halter tops and blue smocks.

We each have our nightstands
of sorts,
practical—space for a cup
with bendable straw,
the vomit bag like a coiled snake,
but also a bit of space left over,
and here we place our totems.
This is how we know them,
the others,
like planets, or skiffs,
that come and go
the orbit of the ward.
A vase of tulips, color yellow,
for the woman who hums the ice cream truck song,
incessantly,
A stuffed cat with stripes and sleepy eyes,
for a man who hugs a pillow all day and night.
A bowl with fruit-shaped candies like faded gems,
for the woman who dials hospitality
several times a day, “no calls? no calls?”

And, finally, and most improbably
the nightstand with the fly swatter,
Although in all my time here
I have seen neither fly, nor cockroach.
Once I thought I saw
a white cabbage moth
dancing at the window pane,
as, often in the garden, I recall

that ghost dancing its own melody
over the hollyhocks.
But it was a trick of the light
or my eyes.
Not even a spider of the smallest sort,
not even a fruit fly!
And here where fruit
is hauled in, basket piled,
waxed, enormous, impermeable, impossible
as the cut-glass candies.
Surely some fruit fly might crouch
in the paper grass?
They must have a man just for flies,
an emperor of insects, escorting them out,
under Judy's righteous intonation.
Could a swatter keep her at bay?
Or slap at solemn pronouncements,
a thwap at death.

On my table,
a book.
A young man, once my student, placed it there
delicately, in the empty space.
Inscribed probably.
But I haven't lifted the cover.
Despite the long empty hours,
the high windows.
I haven't sought the release of the "M," gigantic, wonderful,
trumpeting
across the first page.
To do so now would mean to return
to look,
merely look at,
the passionate imagined intimacy that was
Him (behind the "M") and me.
It would mean a return,
not to the field itself

to wrestle and embrace,
as once I tumbled headlong,
full of passionate intensity,
experience multiplied
by the voice of my own Virgil
who led me, deeper, always deeper.
Is he, too, on this other side?
Does he look, merely?
I believe he's still alive, his children
professors themselves now perhaps.
If I were to raise a feeler,
test the air, as once I did,
the thread, invisible, unreal,
would be still, limp,
let fall.
But I've done my mourning already,
waited out in exile,
without cunning or guile.
The green cover with its harp
has proven useful for impressing the doctors,
the nurses, of course, see through it,
and, so,
it stays shut.

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