

THE MASTER OF LOSS

Nobody in his family obeyed my Uncle Truman's rules,
not the daughter he barely knew, stoned
and drunk when she died in a car wreck, and not
his wife, abandoned on each tour of duty,
who finally abandoned him. But his new wife,
a high-school sweetheart he met at seventy-five

when he moved back to the Ozarks, who perhaps
saw a tenderness behind his bluff expression,
a hurt pride in the military way he carried himself
on his cane, called him up, and he, pleased
to discover he'd been correct about the two of them
all along, took up where he'd left off. She wasn't

with him the winter afternoon when he popped
open the ancient screen door, the first of us inside
my mother's house, his Ozark sister Dot and brother
Wallace pushing the door back on his broken
spring as they followed him one by one, then me.
We didn't go out to the greenhouse, with its torn

plastic ceiling and capsized plants on the table
and tangled hoses on the floor alongside plants
and coffee cans. Yet the house was all my aunt needed
to have nightmares for two weeks afterward, shocked
that whenever her older sister called her long distance
from New Hampshire late at night, telling her stories

about the workers at her nursery and big sales
of the forsythia my dead stepfather once developed,
she sat at a desk surrounded by stacks of old bills
and newspapers, or worse, in the bathroom
on the toilet, talking on the portable phone among
the piles of mail and the magazines scattered all ^{all} ~~Truman~~ ^{Truman}

~~over~~ over the floor. "How can she live like this?" Dot asked,
because everyone understood you had to keep things
in their proper places to know where they were,
but here, my stepfather's overalls and shirts,
which belonged in the closet, were hanging on the bar
of the shower stall, and his shoes were lined up

below then in the tub, and the floor was such a mess
neither she, unsteady on her swollen legs, nor Truman,
on his cane, dared venture beyond the door frame.
Back in the living room, I found Wallace, who wore
a wide bandage across his bald head, searching
through the bookshelf for the family bible my mother

accused him of stealing after my grandmother's
funeral, having forgotten that she took it herself.
"Ten to one, it burned up in the fire she had," he said
with a sigh, probably because now he couldn't
carry it back to the rehab hospital and show it to her
as he smiled the same smile that my grandmother

couldn't resist in her youngest son, and that my mother always hated, thinking of all he got away with when he was a child, and he, remembering all she used to blame him for. But there was plenty here for him to gloat about. In the kitchen, Truman limped over to the counter to try the faucet, which chugged,

then blasted black water on the encrusted pans in the sink. "My God, they's a big mouse trap in between the cans on the floor!" Dot exclaimed. Truman shut the faucet off hard with a scowl, more upset than she was, for after years of swearing by rules and order, he must have felt he was now standing

in disorder itself. "She's lost her grip for sure," he said, the faucet still fast in his hand, and we others agreed because for each of us, life had to do with holding on, however you managed it, against surprises and losses, Truman returning to the past with his high-school sweetheart, Aunt Dot, disoriented unless she knew

where things belonged, Uncle Wallace, distracted for now from his growing cancer by a family grudge, and I myself, who in my grief for a failing mother had brought these dear, diminished siblings from their visit at the hospital to see the stacks and piles and pathways as if the house were a problem

that somehow we could fix. Bent to our purposes,
we missed the message right there around us, that even
as we held on by turning away from loss, my old,
exasperating mother, grown tired of turning away,
had reached out to embrace it, holding everything
she had so tightly and completely it could never leave.