

OLD POETS

At the literary luncheon for the old poet
in lace, her gray-haired daughter is still
hurt by her mother's attachment
to the book. When the daughter
asked what was for supper as a girl,
she tells the others, her mother
went on typing up the manuscript
while reciting with a smile a tiny,
ironic poem: "Air soup and wind
pudding." The poet refuses to believe it,
and denies chasing her daughter
all over the house with a shoe brush
for neglecting to mail the finished
manuscript at the post office.
For what mother would make such a cruel
choice between her two children?

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At the end, when he wore
the address and photograph
of his own house around his neck,
his wife and son always
knew where to find him:
at the town grocery, inviting
the women who came in
to dance. After a lifetime
of going to his upstairs study

to write the poems critics praised
for pushing feeling away
into his carefully assigned ellipses
and margins, he couldn't stop
reaching for this rhythm
of the body, this joyful embrace.

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After he told his friends in sadness
the poetry had stopped, he discovered
on his computer the beautiful poems
he once abandoned, staying up
for a whole night in the excitement
of finishing them. This was the way
he began again, learning through his own
failures how the despair of giving up
can open the heart to poetry.

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At the public celebration of his birthday,
he waved to his audience
from the stage, modest and fragile.
In his email to a friend he was the old
warrior: "Fuck 87! All month
the writing has been going crap."

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