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The Poet

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SARA LONDON

The Poet

*In a murderous time / the heart breaks and breaks /
and lives by breaking. —Stanley Kunitz*

A man decides to die. Enough
is enough. He is ninety-seven,
after all. Time to leave this
world, his beloved's badgering,
the terrible bombs in Baghdad,
even his poems. His family
of bones can no longer hold
up the tent, so to speak. He is
finished with eating. "I'll say
my good-byes now," he tells
his daughter who has flown in
from California. One by one
they come through the door
of his Village apartment
where he waits propped
in his hospital bed like
a pale king. "It's a wake!"
says his hunched-over wife.
One comes all the way from
Virginia—drove through the night—
and seeing his old mentor,
sits heavily on the bed and breaks
into sobbing; he can't get out
a word. The old man,
whose eyes are closed, takes
the sad one's hand, squeezes it,
"My legs—" he says. "You're
crushing my legs!" Everyone
is relieved. And it is quiet
again when another storms in,
railing that no one told him
until today. "How long has he

been this way?" he shouts
at them all. The old man's
eyes remain tightly shut;
when the loud one departs
with his noise, the dying one's
eyes pop back open. And still
they come, with their long thick
hair, the young women, one
bearing lavender from his
faraway summer garden.
(It is March, and lavender is all
that's yet greened against
the stubborn chill.) The lavender
girl rubs his thin left arm, careful
not to crush it, as his editor
gives him Chinese foot massage.
Another presses her thumbs
into his temples and pushes
them this way and that.
"Who called you?" the wife
asks a woman on the couch.
The daughter clings to her
little cell phone. They come
from New Hampshire,
Massachusetts and New York.
The old poet feels rumbling
in his belly. Maybe I should
eat something, he thinks,
a little rice, a little fish.
Now he sits on the edge
of his bed, stands on his feet.
The visitors note that the
engines are going again,
so to speak. They smile
back and forth. There are
phone calls. "He's eating,"

they say. "He gets up to go
to the bathroom." They
watch to see if he will go into
that other room, his "cell."
They must get home
to their children, jobs, news
of the war, their poetry, too.
He puckers his lips for their kisses.
"He didn't mean it," says his
wife to no one in particular,
sitting with her blind eyes
closed. There is a lot
of head shaking. His
birthday is in July.
While everyone is away,
crocuses, little bayonets of
desire, let's say, break through
barriers of garden mud. The
"stinkpile" hums against
the summer house—he can hear it
across the Hudson, across two
states, truly. He dreams
of the small, bloodless planet
of the olive, smooth in his
five o'clock martini, smells
something, sweet, *Lavandula
augustifolia* comes to mind.
The tide, a mere two months
away, in and out, out and in
for God's sake! The vision
pulses erratically—my heart,
he thinks (eyes flashing,
shoulder hitching up
in anticipation)—my heart
could not be readier
to break again.