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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.