

Dana Leslie Goldstein

Ready or Not

From my faux-leather train seat
I hear behind me
a gravelly matron confide
in her perfumed friend:
"This morning, you wouldn't believe,
what I saw while I was getting ready..."

A decade ago, I would've kept listening,
But now I find myself pinned
by that single, pedestrian phrase –
getting ready –

I hear fear in its every utterance,
see need in each strand of hair
pushed behind a vulnerable ear.
Everything now
is an attempt to hold us back
from the shriek and ululation
of terror in the throat, audible
only from inside the body.

That last stroke of mascara
Enhancing the lash, that spit and gargle
and spit again, razor's flick, cologne's splash
freshening against bacterial overthrow.

Breakfast tides us 'til lunch, as if
we could know that we'd still be
alive by noon; we act
as if we know, can know, can plan.
We can at least plan.

Detail by detail, we get ready,
each morning pretending
we don't know
what we get ready for.

On Waking (After Almost a Decade)

The early morning sky: fingerprint
smeared across wax paper. Familiar.

She rises. The skin of her stomach still creased
from sleeping knees tucked tight.

Reaching for her bathrobe she tries to smell
his body in its plush. It's been too long.

Staying alive is a choice.

Her plants crane their tender necks toward the light;
taking a crisp, brown leaf from her China Doll
between slim fingers, she severs with her thumbnail
the fragile stem. So important to prune.

Staying alive is a choice.

The difficulty of it.

A hillock of dust in a corner
attracts her eye,
reminding her of skin,
sloughed off in the course of living.

So easy to blow the corner clean,

the fist of existence unclenched.

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