

like a rock bulging in the surface of a stream,  
and if all these signs are visible,

then I know that it is you,  
and I am standing in the presence of the stain

of death on life,  
and I hold still and inhale deeply

as if mortality  
were a kind of fancy French perfume.

Tony Hoagland

Safeway

Even after an hour in her room  
with eyeshadow and rouge,  
moisture whip, lip gloss, and perfume  
my mother still looked like she was dying

unexotically,  
still looked like a person  
trying to impersonate a person  
going somewhere other than the grave,

though she was only going to the store,  
after weeks of living  
horizontally  
while her blood was scoured by detergents  
bleached by blasts of subatomic light.

Riding on her bony little head,  
the glossy auburn wig  
looked like something stolen,  
the lame hip pulled her to one side  
like the stuck wheel of the shopping cart we pushed

past pyramids of fruit,  
down mile long corridors of breakfast food  
where cartoon animals shot sugar stars  
over an infinity of bowls,

—a landscape which seemed,  
in the brightness and abundance of its goods,  
like somebody's idea  
of paradise—

and the bright, continual ringing of the registers  
was like the sound of happiness  
for sale.

I was angry, dutiful, and seventeen,  
afraid she was going to read her obituary  
in the faces of the shoppers;

frightened they would stop and stare  
at the black cloud hovering above our heads  
as we moved slow as history  
up and down the aisles.

Maybe months of sickness had burned away my  
mother's shame  
and left in her dry mouth  
a taste for irony, maybe she wanted  
to show the populace

what death looked like in person  
or maybe it was simply her last chance  
to make small talk with the neighbors  
who stopped to say hello—

Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Green,  
whose kindness I imagined, then despised,  
caught awkwardly among them as I was,  
between the living and the dead.

But looking back across the years,  
the scene looks different to me now. I see  
a little group of people, halted  
in the midst of life,  
their carts jammed up  
against the lettuce and the tangerines.

There is no gallows standing there,  
no spectral executioner fingering his blade.

And I seem sweet at seventeen, innocent  
even in my rage—  
trying to protect  
what didn't need protecting  
from what couldn't be saved.