

If I Had Known Her Then

My mother held the picture in her soft and swollen hands that day. Slowly, and shaking, she gently set it down on the counter, smiling a little as she turned to leave. Those self same hands that in my youth were strong and nurturing, were then fallow, liver spotted, trembling beneath the shadow of passing vitality and remembered youth.

My mother's smiling up at me, or past me, from the college photo on the counter; if I had known her then could I have trusted her? To see in her the faults of youth and that which marks us human and none which made her mother—would I have trusted her steady grip beneath my sleeping and blanketed body? Here they hold a cigarette. She hadn't smoked since I was ten but somehow that scent of her in her jacket, fresh from outside and smelling of smoke and winter, it was returning to me.

At night I awake—or maybe I'm asleep—to find myself clutching my sheets like I did my mother's final hands. I had wondered how I would miss them; if when their flesh was in the ground I would feel that loneliness. And here in the night that emptiness has found me. Those who love us and have left us leave us in a solitude we can't appeal.