Ars Moriendi
(the art of dying)

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My little finger is dying
    just the tip of the little finger
    of my left hand
I carry my secret carefully
    let it hang like a single gold coin
    in a cluster of other fingers
    still trying to
    stay alive
But the word is out
    and they will have to be ready too
    when their time comes.

My Chinese lady-doctor
    who does not believe in acupuncture
diagnoses my ailment
    in impeccable Latin:
    “Digitus nervix immobilis,”
    which means, of course,
    “Your little finger is dying.”

Numb and heavy now
    it will spread like a stain
    of invisible ink
    into the other fingers
    of my left hand,
    down my left arm
    across my chest
    then up the right arm
    into the fingers
    of my right hand:
    a lovely rainbow of death.

I am told the dying process
    may skip the torso for awhile
if I take hot baths and long walks
and eat lots of garlic.
But infallibly, like fall of night,
it will descend
into the nether limbs
hip to thigh to ankle
until my feet, hanging there
in my black Wallabees, wait
to be declared officially dead!

But I promise:
I will leave my liver
To the liver-bank
My kidneys to the kidney-bank
My eyeballs to the eyeball-bank
And my meager monthly salary
In perpetuity
To the Committee for the Rehabilitation
Of Downtown Providence.

No, I will not go
Like Howard Hughes
I will cut my hair
And clip my nails
And stay clean and neat
Til the very end.

I will not, like Damon Runyan
Ask to be cremated
And to have my ashes strewn
Lovingly, by helicopter,
Over Manhattan Island.
With my luck
A brisk wind
Would come up
Off of Sandy Hook
And blow me to Bridgeport.
No, I will not imitate anyone
I will go in my own way,
   Covered with unhealed wounds
   Uncancelled debts
       And no collateral —
   Heavy to look at
       With my heavy hand
       And heavy limbs
   But easy — easy to carry.

Lying there I will begin
   To dream about the end Water all around me
Cool and sweet to the lips
One dream recurs
I am a child,
Suddenly a child again
Let loose after hours
In a Baskin-Robbins Ice-Cream Parlor
Free to sample
All thirty-five delicious flavors
O creamy escaton!

Fully awake now
I notice all sounds
       And sight and tastes
       Am keener . . . brighter . . .
I admit that I am jealous
I am jealous because I have never had
   A near-death experience
But I have been near life so many times,
I have felt the touch of life
       And have trembled at the touch
So even in the face of death
   I am willing and eager
To testify on behalf of life.

But I need more time
   There is never enough time
       And death robs us
Of the little that is left
I have work to do
   Friends to be loved
   Enemies to be forgiven
   Words to be shouted against the storm
   Shadows to be dispelled
      That still blot out the sun!
Besides, I am bound by a pact
I made long ago with Beauty
   That before I died
   I would shape one word
      One cry, one song
And let the sound of it reach everywhere
So that no one might escape from love
I cannot describe the power of this word
   But the thought
   Of bringing it to life
      Fills me with joy.

Now, after the word of life
   There will be time for death
I have my plans
   Eyes closed, hands folded on my lap
I will lean back in my black vinyl Lazy-Boy
   And fall like a sashweight
No need for choice or effort
   Or good intentions
The weight of my body
   Will carry me down—down
      To the place of rest
Without pain or passion
I will give myself over —

According to our custom
   My body lay overnight
      In the silence of the House Chapel
Stretched out in the very place
   Where I used to pray
I wore a borrowed Cappa
   And a new pair of shoes
      Bought just for the occasion
Plus a large Rosary
   Locked in once and for all
   Under my rigid hands

I lay there through the night
   And watched my brothers and friends
As they watched me
Baffled by the choices
They were free to make
Should they offer me honor, respect
Puzzlement or honest complaint
At promises unfulfilled, our common woe?
They watched me carefully and courteously
Still wondering who I really was
And wondering too what it would be like to die.

I knew that I wanted to tell them
   That death always defends its own secrets
   That it always favors darkness
   That it feeds on faith
   And the rush of heart to heart
   (you want to be with the one you love)
Whatever the shape or color of their gaze
I knew they always looked kindly upon me
And I know they will be kind to my sisters
And even lie and little on my behalf —
    To enhance the memory
    Of my piety and usefulness.

Now there is only my body
   And the place it occupies in this place
A body lightened and sweetened
   And ready to be lifted up
Strange to speak of the body in this way
But my spirit has already fled
And I am, even now, free to begin
My new calling:
    To cultivate the ways of love
    And to teach the art of dying.