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## Ars Moriendi (the art of dying)

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 a 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.