ELEGY WITH A CAMEO BY LINDA RONSTADT

for my father

You aren’t dead, but something
in the honeyed scythe
of her voice smote me
there in the middle of Target,
left me weeping in the aisles,
mourning you, and by extension,
mourning myself, remembering
how you would lift each record
like a skiff and place it gently
on the table, adjusting
the needle’s arm until the crackle
of music began. I loved the skips
the most, how you would grumble,
cursing, knocking on the shelf,
how a minute would repeat
in an endless motorcade of hours,
and this was called
childhood, as I understood it.

Neither of you was gone,
yet at that moment my own life
skipped, and for a moment
I heard its silence.
MEDITATION

after Baudelaire

Settle down now, sadness. It’s time for bed. You asked for evening. Well, here it is. A fine mist covers the city like dread. It may look peaceful, but trust me, it isn’t.

People can be vile, especially large crowds of people lashed by the bloody whip of pleasure, reaping remorse like stones. Come on, sadness, take my hand, let’s go. Watch the years die most unfashionably, leaning too far over heaven’s balcony, wearing yesterday’s wedding dress. Smiling, regret really knows how to work a room.

The sun’s half-asleep. It’s nearly dead under the vaulted arch of sky. Listen, my dear, can you hear it? Night on tiptoe at the top of the stairs, trailing a shroud behind it.
LIKE RUNNING INTO HILLARY CLINTON IN THE WOODS

Some poems just won’t let you go, the way grief finds you where you least expect it— in freeway gridlock, for example, or while watching your kids spin on the Tilt-A-Whirl, the golden thread of their laughter woven into sunlight. Some poems, like grief, like anger, seethe just under the surface of your being, a Bengal tiger pacing in its cage, its strides a portent, an omen. Nothing, you believe, happens for a reason, there is no grand design or fate, and if that poem really wants to be written, it will pop out from behind a tall shrub or tree and shake you just a little, the way some dreams shake us from sleep.
RECURRING DREAM: ELEVATOR (CO-STARRING PRINCE AND WITH AN UNSCRIPTED APPEARANCE BY EMILY DICKINSON)

Till elevators drop us from our day…
—Hart Crane

Only it’s not an elevator, it’s a death chamber
in your parents’ backyard, a queue of people
waiting to enter. Prince is ahead of you.
This is where the dream turns creepy:
you conflate the androgynous figure
standing next to you in line with the late
rock star because of his real-life death
in an elevator some weeks later, and now
you’re uncertain whether it was really Prince
you dreamed of, or if you made that up.
You know it’s against the rules—one soul
at a time—but still you can’t resist the urge
to calm him when he loses it and then to step
with him inside. Here’s where the dream
turns self-referential: You take his hand—
your own—and together you fall
through the levels of consciousness, just like
in that Dickinson poem, only here there is no
snap of the plank, no end of knowing,
no then —. Dearly beloved, let this be
a lesson to you: never try to decode a dream
through the lens of a poem, especially
a poem by Dickinson. As a matter of fact,
ban all Dickinsonian dream symbols
from your vocabulary. There are better poets
to draw on for these sorts of things—Berryman,
for example, Franz Wright, most definitely—
and besides, as is well known, elevators
do not commonly appear in American poetry
until the early part of the twentieth century.