Dear Bartender

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Recommended Citation
Graham, Catherine (2014) "Dear Bartender," The Laureate: Vol. 3, Article 23. Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol3/iss1/23

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DEAR BARTENDER

Catherine Graham

Drunks die of their own accord,
and exist thereafter like empty tortoise shells.

Leaving their beautiful wives to grow old,
and their grandchildren to revere them as fables.

To sit up he had to build his momentum,
Rocking back and forth, his arthritic spine
Never allowing him to just simply stand upright.

“Just a snitch” he’d say through yellow hands,
Puffing on his cigarette.

 Moments later the glass of Corby’s whiskey
 Would be brought to him by my father,
 Then an adolescent.
The glass, still the deep tan of whiskey,
The coloring of cola still mixing its way into the solution,
Only to become a trace of its former self.

“How did you sleep last night?” he’d ask my father,
Who the answer always escaped,

With your eyes closed.

I don’t think my father slept a wink
Waiting for his own to die,
Always asking himself.
Who was sleeping? What was awake?

I’ve been told stories. How the whiskey bubbled
On your lips and the cigarette burned in your limp hand,
The plume rising tight into the air,
As you took your last shallow breathe.

For the first time, I hope there is a heaven
Looming above.
So you can see me as I ponder what I might become
(stirring the whiskey and ice in my glass)
Looking for some sustenance to fill this shell.
I am the arbiter of night;
   Lord of vacant streets
        where mailboxes and
   fire hydrants stand

Silent-vigil
against the pink murmur of the dawn.

Molasses dreams
   pull words like fruit-
       from trees
   catching conspicuous notes
       falling
       from voices I thought I
       would never hear again.

Voices
    of back alley saints
    with wings as smooth as
        ravens’ claws.

Fill my lungs
    with the will of poets’ pasts.