

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DEAD MOTHER

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ROLLENDER

At first, it's like old times, old bones: she puts her hand on the inside of your lower arm's trusting skin, a cat's belly turned up. She wants to know about what she's missed – but things that don't matter as much to you – the swans on the lake, did their five cygnets survive, or did a snapping turtle drag them under the water, all except one? Her white dress rustles, the tinkle of tiny finger bones in a pocket. She remembers the hummingbird's ruby throat shimmering still at the feeder. You tell her how your body failed, so the baby was born nine weeks early. Her hands make the shape of wings. No, no, you say, he lived. *Can you tell me again what it's like to be hungry?* That's really what she wants to know. *What does the body release in sleep?* You say the hummingbird's too frantic to watch. To keep the baby alive, you hold him over your heart, skin on skin. Pray for mercy, for how the body hollows, your mother intones, and that's how you remember her – if you don't pray against everything, the roof will fall in, the trees will pierce the windows, the quilts go up in flames. You don't tell her how your whole life has gone brittle, as if one shake will break every word you try to substitute. She's your mother, yet one who

returns trailing celestial afterbirth, a sort of innocence:

Tell me what it feels like to put your foot in water. What does it mean when you can't make any more milk for the child? You

don't ask her to bless your house or the baby whose bones rise against skin. Her hands have been in the earth.

Well, they are there now, folded in this quiet sacrament

of how what has been useful sleeps. You, the living

mother, shake salt from the tablecloth, teach your

child to nest where it's warm, tell your dead to walk

toward whatever window is full of light.