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Mortality

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Mortality

Leah A. Zuidema

At age 4
they learn
Mortality.
Wedge in somewhere between
P is for Popcorn and Remember to wash
there is a lesson
not on the books.
Not on my books.

With our youngest
it was last week.
A 5 am wake-up call:
“Daddy Daddy DADDY!”
A trip up the stairs
for this report:
“I had a bad bad bad
bad dream.”
Ready to banish
monsters
back to make believe,
I’m not ready for this:
“It was about
if I were dead.”
In my 5 am brainfog
I note her perfect
use of the subjunctive were.
It unsettles me all the more;
confirms to me in the
logic of interrupted sleep
that if she
Knows
the language then I cannot
help her to unknow the rest.

For the oldest
it was two years back.
A lunch date,
she and I
at a french-fry restaurant.
I am droning out the
kids' menu,
chicken fingers, grilled cheese, macaroni.
She sucks in a deep
breath,
announces her selection:
"I don't want to die."
That's not on the menu.
I am speechless, and she
repeats it,
crying now,
"I don't
want
to die!"
as though
saying it louder is all it will
take to get me to fill
her order.

I didn't know
this lesson would be upon us
so soon, just 4 years in.
Their too-early knowledge
transports us
together
back to the Garden:
we know we are naked,
we know we will surely die.
At age 4
they learn
Mortality,
and we with them.