

Pachyderm

He was only in hospice six hours before he wasn't anywhere
 I take a picture, his last, of his body in the bed
 Marge next to him
 I touch his arm,
 cold,
 life makes us warm is a thing I guess I knew before but

I'm holding his hand in the ICU
 He tells me a long story about the Lone Ranger
 that he keeps falling asleep during
 His feet swollen the size of elephant's
 feet
 skin cracked horrible
 unclear if he still has toenails
 many times I stop myself from taking a picture of them
 Marge says *I can work on those when we get home*
 he asks Marge to leave and says to me
Do you remember the last time you visited the house and you said my novel
got longer because I added more swears to it? Well I'm talking about my
mortality here son and that joke hurt my feelings and it just seems to me that
you never really respected my genre of choice, and I respect you more than
your brothers
 falls asleep.
 Later I tell Keith about this,
 what would become me and Pa's final private conversation,
 and Keith goes
What did you expect him to say?

Robb I just wanted to tell you that I know I wasn't a perfect dad, I made a lot of mistakes and I wish I could change them and I'm sorry but I love you and no matter what I did wrong, I had always wanted the very best for you boys
Were you waiting for him to say that?
Well now that you mention it
yes.

What would be the last time we visit at the house
he says his novel keeps getting longer
and I say *Is that because you keep adding swears to it?*
As we're leaving he makes Marge go over to our car
so she can tell us that his feet only look that big
because he is wearing a lot of socks
a few months later he breaks his ankle
without feeling it and he never stands
again.

Wake up calls aren't real
the concept exists for padding out
profiles in *People*
and the interstitial segments of *American Ninja Warrior*
otherwise we don't get scared awake
becoming better selves
we get scared into our most numb
retreating to the well-worn, not-great comforts
we've taken a lifetime to curate.

I wake up to a phone call from the hospital
your father had a code blue but he's stable now
I react like that sounds serious because it sounds serious
he says *code blue* again and I ask what that means
his heart stopped.
Oh. Have you called my stepmom yet?
No.
Oh, okay. I will.

If elephants make it to old age

a common death
is starvation because
their last set of teeth become ground down dust
and they can no longer chew,
 elephants are evolving
to be born without tusks
presumably so they won't be killed for their ivory
so they'll be worthless to poachers
but it's just the females
wake-up call programmed in DNA
that good kind of generational trauma
cracked feet feel ground sounds
miles and miles and miles
scatter the tooth dust over decades
miles and miles
elephants will have funerals
where members of the herd
touch their warm trunks
to the body of their fallen
their eyes do a thing that
resembles what we call crying
each member of the herd
will come up to say a few words
funny and poignant
over their beloved's husk
and everyone will say it was a good service
before getting into their cars
and fanning out
away from ground zero
migrate together again for the next memorial
in a few years.

He had a toe wound he hid from Marge
for a fucking decade
for a fucking decade
he didn't tell her
didn't go to the doctor

until he went into sepsis
had his toe amputated, poached
and this was five years before
all that shit up there
 did you know wounds
can literally never heal?
wounds can decide
the fresh air does them good
and now you have a new toothless mouth
that eats bacteria and fungus
and which you must never feed.

The nurses from the wound clinic came to the memorial
still in gray scrubs
that was the only time I cried
they're around suffering all day
and they invite more
for Marge. They reach out
and we clasp their hands
as they walk past.

Elephants are known for their
strong family units of women.
Who knows where the men go?
Try and ask them.
They don't even know where they are.