

■ POETRY ■

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ETIQUETTE

What is the proper way to respond when your mother says:
Tomorrow, if I haven't died, my nails need to be trimmed and filed.
She's not in the habit of saying such things. Her mood is chipper,
or would be if she had a snail's energy. She is weak, and she is ready
(even if your father is not—she's had to give up protecting him),

and she'd rather not worry about snagging the bedspread or running
a comb through her hair. The importance of being presentable and being polite
has faded, and—though she is glad to have her own hair at the end—
she doesn't want to fuss over bangs. Telling how the doctor in her dream
announced *this is the last day*, she sighed. *If only it were true.*

But the formalities of this world still attend me,
and I stand by her, by the sink, not knowing what to say.
I believe Miss Manners would be stumped, Emily Post and Dear Abbey
might confer and get nowhere. And how to explain to my brothers
my anticipation the next morning, a feeling I remember from early Christmas Eves

when I still believed in Santa. Would he come in the night? Was I good enough?
(*I want what you want*, I'd said, meaning her comfort even if it meant her death.)
In Sunday school they taught me to be thankful for what I got
and look forward to what I would receive. A picture book showed how Jesus
knew to come for the ill if they propped their elbow with pillows,

one hand up, limp flag of surrender. I think of her hand,
ragged and pale. She had asked and he had not come.
The next day I clipped and smoothed her nails.
I stroked her hand. I did what I could of what she asked
and scolded God for not teaching his son better manners.