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Whistler's Mother

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DON GEIGER

WHISTLER'S MOTHER

Aside from the public hog-wash
by which we doll up obliteration,
the truth is that she's not a sweet old thing—
always dunning me,
squeezing me out
on still another pointless errand,
complaining that I do not call on her
and, when I do call, talking
incessantly about her bowels.

Attention to her needs is my duty.
I know that; she made a good boy of me.
But why must she, as I am convinced she does,
carefully, before I appear, take out her teeth?
But I always say, "Mom, you should remember your teeth,"
and, tottering—perilously, as I can plainly see—
to the glass in which she keeps them,
she puts her teeth back in,
and bravely smiles.

Oh, it is not a means—mean word, mean thought—
it is a way, a way to keep herself with me,
an image to fill her pause between my visits—
how carefully she plots their submarining course,
as I plot, careful of her sightings,
but careful too that she can never prove
her navigation mocked beyond repair—
for what kind of son is he
who will not care, ceaselessly care?
I know, do not know, what she sees in my face,
but she fears, as I fear, and doubts, and so she scores me
for my children's precipitous moral decline,
in shocked bereavement wonders
at my wife's hostility to her,
and hoarsely, with gagging sighs,

as though she were training a death-rattle toward perfection,
wonders what could have been her failure as a mother
to have bred so scant a man
(Praise God, his father is dead, beyond witness!),
cruelly indifferent to her last days
(indeed, her last days, her last months, her last years,
these past ten years, O Lord, how long?)—
pick, pick, picking with her raveling voice
until I'm forced to see my ragged charity
exactly as she sees: a contemptible gift
she scorns, but keeps, hugs, would,
but has not the strength to, return.

But what is the use of calling a spade a spade,
even if one could tell it from a heart?
For even as my pulse drums protest
against her whine of peevish yearning,
a relentlessly pounding pestle in my brain—
amid the snarl of those unneighborly artilleries
of time and tenderness when they so dispose their forces
that they collapse on one another in a common rout—
grinds my hard awareness of her state to powder,
and once again I see her, gay and dauntless,
that colored photograph on her wall
come to life and in full command
on the battlements of her love,
firing the frail winters of my childhood
crimson with mustard plasters,
each of which begins again to burn
a hole through my breast.

Goodbye, Mother.
Take care of yourself.
Call if you need anything.
I'll see you again soon.