Mrs. Ramsay's Knee

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FACE

The bleeding head looked up from the black road,
A white shirt on the shoulder and the arm pushing up,
The asphalt gritty and black, the white staccato
Streaks of speed. An accident. I was driving east
In a black night toward the coast on a map, toward love.
Warm, I hoped, at the end of the road. Late
And so few cars on the wide, divided highway.
Fear of drift. Taste of salt. Sound of speed.
And then the headbeams of my car caught the face,
White like the shirt. Hair on the brow a lick of blood.
My car swerved to miss the bleeding face
In the road. Then I woke up. I knew who he was.

My father's brother, killed at the age of twelve
In a hunting accident, years before I was born,
Years before my father knew my mother.
They were taking guns out of the back floor
Of the car, doves still bleeding, fluttering in the sack,
And a gun his cousin lifted, loaded, his finger
On the trigger, carelessly. He didn't know what
He was doing. And my grandmother ran toward the shot,
Ran and ran at the sound of the shot—she couldn't know
What had happened. But she knew. Younger then
Than I am now, she got over it, and was kind.
There was no enduring sadness in her.
I admired how she killed a rat in her kitchen
With a flyswatter once, how she watered flowers
On her porch and they bloomed and bloomed.
She lived forty more years in the big house
With a gun under her pillow, his photograph
A large oval over the mantel in the living room.
Old women, great aunts, smelling sour
Like old flesh, sweet powder and mildew,
Would grab me, feel my bones, said I looked
Just like him—that I was a girl didn’t matter—
The small mouth, the cheekbones. I used to
Stare at his handsome beauty—the dark eyes.

What the mind does for the mind should be a kind
Of healing, and maybe this is. I had forgotten
How their hands moved over me until the dream
Of the young man dying in the road, whom cars ignored
As I did, speeding toward love week after week
And never arriving—the oddly familiar boy,
The bleeding face looking up from the road,
The head without a body, none that I could see,
The mangled car in the dark burning up.
I didn’t get a good look. It doesn’t matter
How it happened, who abandoned the scene,
Just that he’s bleeding. I did nothing but swerve.

I wake to birds in trees on another coast.
Nobody lives here that I know. Week after week,
I sleep dreamless. And I have made a pact
With desire. Affections sustain me. A quiet hour
With an open book and a dear face near me in the dark.
I wake to redwoods, firs, and a view over islands
North into Canada, a distant ridge of mountains
Rimmed with snow, and this comfortable oddness
Of feeling him sometimes alive in my shoulders,
In the way I hold my hand on my knee, as if waiting
In the woods with a gun in my arms, quietly searching
The white sky, the bare autumn trees for birds.