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Category: Poetry

Standing Dead

I watched old men croak on a video screen fed
by white wires. I watched old men die on live
feeds and I was connected to them
with thin, white wires. The old men seized.
The old men slurred. The old men shut off
their cameras but I still felt them pulsating
through the wires, even when the rubber started
to peel away, even when copper zapped my thumb
as I put it to my ear, trying to hear
a heartbeat, a hearing aid with feedback
loops, a talking point that rhymed three ways.
I talked with you in real time about the old men
gargling and dying and standing dead
like trees, standing for group pictures
like a forest stripped of bark. I talked
with you in real time and saw your icon
bubble up with word and felt far, yes,
I shouldn't have talked with you about men
standing dead some miles away, about how I pulled
the wires that connected me to their breath. I had no wires
that connected me to your breath. That was
the difference. When you coughed
in real time, I could not send you
anything of importance. There was no air
to be bought, to be wired from CitiBank.
You were not a public figure; you were
sitting in your bedroom playing me
a cello piece in real time, and the space
between our screens distorted the sound,
made your bow lift
and jumble itself. A private
composition. Your bow cut
through Real Time, peeled
back how absurd
those words looked
together. We could never
stand dead, we
were not people
who were afforded
that luxury. To stand
at all. To be stripped
and propped
up. And then

walked past
as if
living. A
woman said
trees talk
to each other
through underground
movements, and
I thought
of how we learned
to sign so we could talk
during religious services.
We sat like trees, maybe
more like shrubs,
slumped like that,
and we exchanged words
under the wooden table
about small needs, boredom
and bathrooms. Sometimes
we signed *hi* across the room
just to show we could talk
and understand and be
underneath, be blatant like
that. I've had lots of people try
to teach me their secret languages,
and I've forgotten every prefix, every condition. Trees
cannot forget because they are tied in with white wires,
bundled, hands forced to sign. At some point we were caught,
forced to sit on our hands, our wires to each other
folded in on themselves. Someone told me
the smell of freshly cut grass is a warning
to other grasses around it, and maybe that's not true
but I like it. I wanted to sign a warning to you
as perfect as that. No language can lift itself
into the air like that. No language can mark itself
on white jeans like that, can whistle between
its own scent. I was always going to lose.
I was always going to try
to stand dead like old men
and hope animals would walk
past like I was just
stripped of outerness.
I wasn't dead and
I wasn't standing.
I was lying
on the grass
with you,
signing
to each other
letters that stood
for some need
we understood
in the silence.
But speaking it
was bursting out
from underground,
sprouting up. When

I talk, I go over myself
like I'm tilling the ground
for more words. You do this,
too. I have made up lots of warning
words. They have never carried
much with them. I form my hand
into the words *cut grass*. You do not know
what this means. I have many white wires
that feed directly back to my mouth. A loop
of Real Time. When you cut the grass
it was a warning. A snake curled near
the wilting shed. When you cut the trees
it was a presidential conference, it was
a photoshoot. Standing dead looks solemn,
it's true. We cannot do it but we can watch,
we can talk about it under the table,
we can find the grass, surrounded
by cabinets of standing dead,
and feel the warnings released
around our bodies. We can lie
in it, we can form our fists
into letters, our fingers
into wires. And the trunks
will be dead quiet
and the ground
will be yelling.