

Alan Ainsworth

Breath

*We long for a little weakness,
darkness, and fiction, for the
crowded, the smut, the closeness and
malice of things. —Robert Lowell*

We long for
anything that still lives—the woman crying
in her bathroom at four in the morning because her brother
is in love with a man, has always been in love with men.
“What does this mean?” she says into the phone and lies
down on the cool tile. “I wanted you to know the truth.”

A little weakness
is all we care about these days, not the melodramatic scene
but the slight fidgeting, the pupils dilating momentarily,
our inability to cover up when their problems become ours.
The woman thinks of the warmth surrounding sex,
feels the tile, and falls asleep to the

darkness and
dreams of light. It is too late. This might be the point in the book
where the reader, too tired herself, puts a bookmark on this page,
takes off her glasses, and turns off the light. She can think
of nothing else except the characters in this biography,
the people who, no matter what else happens to them, will all die.

Fiction
is what is important: there we can move from one place to the other
with these people and then stop. Because this seems more
like real life. We don't continue with people until they die.
We think this until we call our mother for Easter, and hear of death.
We look for a picture and wonder why we never missed this relative

for the crowded
shapes of our lives—the lover's triangles, the circles repeating
forever, the diamonds with corners pulling away, pushing toward—

fill the moments, make us forget the random meeting, talking to,
talking about. We try to imagine a time when we weren't here listening to
a woman unfold a dream in which we took part. "In a Japanese garden. . . ."

The smut

all we think of as we listen. Looking around the room, we see all
the men she has slept with. And what does she do to get these men,
we ask. She looks at them and tells them what they want to hear,
just like she's doing now, describing all of us in beautiful
flowing satins of emerald and ruby, covered with birds. . . .

The closeness and

intimacy surround her as she makes us feel a part of the cloth
that she weaves as a dream, taking hold of us. We cross the stream
of water on the wooden bridge, following her, leaving
what was ours behind. She stops, looks back, and the spell
is broken, for when she sees, we see

malice

—the malice which shows up later as she is told she is ugly
and not because she is. No longer do we have sympathy for her,
for these people, and we hope that the next page will turn
on them, will cause them to disappear without the messy details
of life springing up, the broken lines, the undramatic pauses

of things.

That is what they have become, things, pieces in a ritual:
only they aren't breathing anymore. They are just images
to be remembered or forgotten, to be found again, changed.
The woman returns to the bridge, meets the man and reminds him
of the differences between word and life, dream and breath.