



The Accounts (Phoenix Poets)

Katie Peterson

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The death of a mother alters forever a family's story of itself. Indeed, it taxes the ability of a family to tell that story at all. *The Accounts* narrates the struggle to speak with any clear understanding in the wake of that loss. The title poem attempts three explanations of the departure of a life from the earth—a physical account, a psychological account, and a spiritual account. It is embedded in a long narrative sequence that tries to state plainly the facts of the last days of the mother's life, in a room that formerly housed a television, next to a California backyard. The visual focus of that sequence, a robin's nest, poised above the family home, sings in a kind of lament, giving its own version of ways we can see the transformation of the dying into the dead. In other poems, called "Arguments," two voices exchange uncertain truths about subjects as high as heaven and as low as crime. Grief is a problem that cannot be solved by thinking, but that doesn't stop the mind, which relentlessly carries on, trying in vain to settle its accounts. The death of a well-loved person creates a debt that can never be repaid. It reminds the living of our own psychological debts to each other, and to the dead. In this sense, the death of this particular mother and the transformation of this particular family are evocative of a greater struggle against *any* changing reality, and the loss of all beautiful and passing forms of order.

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