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April Fools

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Jennifer C. Cormack

I was painting my toenails hot pink,
noticing their neatly trimmed shapes
and healthy skin, when I smarted

at the thought of you, imprisoned
with that boisterous roommate
while convalescing down the road,

trying to convince doctors you could live
alone again. Hospital food was fabulous:
best Caesar salad you ever had.

I wonder if you've been eating at all,
if my bread and homemade applesauce
needed manna power. If in a decade

of invitations to dine, stop smoking,
or share your beloved son's contact info
you considered your tomfoolery.

I cared enough to mow your lawn, escort
you to the farmer's market, visit the hospital
daily after roofers watched an ambulance

leave your house. Why did you foil me
with your fear of Alzheimer's and of walking naked
down the street, then startle me with a call

that both legs needed amputating?
Your nailless, rotting toes were a barometer
for your feisty renegade spirit, conditioned

to reclusiveness. Independence. I didn't cry
when I heard you died on April Fools—
a flawless spring day. I was buying irises

and daylilies when your son called
from Minnesota. I knew, without answering,
you were gone. I drove home. Unloaded

the plants. Washed the car. And peeked
between houses at your vivacious azaleas.
An older couple parked out front.
Had they brought you home from rehab
a day early? Could that be your brother?

I sighed, relieved I had been replaced.

What if you couldn't make a go of it?
What if you really couldn't walk or stand
long enough to microwave dinner,

take a sponge bath? What if I found you
crumpled, a bag of bones on the floor,
dead? I didn't cry when asked to search

your bedroom. Select fresh undergarments,
an outfit, and slip-on shoes for cremation.
I didn't cry when I drove them to the funeral

home, framed by live oaks, or carried
your will to probate while your son recovered
from his Cancun family vacation.

I didn't cry when he told me your ashes
were shipped to Minnesota. No memorial.
You hated to bother anyone, but I know

you hungered for attention by lingering
at the doorstep and on the phone. Yesterday
I received an e-mail to unlock your home

for the auctioneer to inventory. I cried.