

Fast-Thinning Throng

Rachel Hadas

*The two stand in the fast-thinning throng of victims,
but they speak as if they were alone.*

- Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

I'm angrily packing to fly to my dying brother.
My husband stands and watches. As a tree
might look at someone, he looks down at me.
For him each death is walled in its own courtyard.

When, on the other hand, my friend hears news
of mortal illness, empathy keeps her up.
She lies awake anticipating death
steering in her direction. And it will.

Like Sydney Carton and the little seamstress
lined up in the "fast-thinning throng of victims"
in the shadow of the guillotine,
each of us gets to claim a place, a turn.

That shadow frightens; saddens; irritates me.
My husband's distance, my friend's fascination
rub me in equal opposite wrong ways.
But those whom we feel freest to reproach

are the lucky ones with whom we live.
Only at them are we allowed to fume.
Rolling my little suitcase toward the front
door as my husband stands, tree-like, in the far

corner of the living room, "Do more!"
I want to snarl. "Give, help, care, love me more!"
But I am not lovable today. Should I know better?
Which of us can walk into the place

where death presides and know just what to say
and do, and say and do it, nothing more
and nothing less? No person that I know.
But poetry, that mix of memory

and measured time and what can be reprieved,
with grave decorum tells the bad news, mourns
with tact, and running out of things to say
reaches the last line, ends it, shuts the door.

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