

## THE MUTES

Those groans men use  
passing a woman on the street  
or on the steps of the subway

to tell her she is a female  
and their flesh knows it,

are they a sort of tune,  
an ugly enough song, sung  
by a bird with a slit tongue

but meant for music?

Or are they the muffled roaring  
of deafmutes trapped in a building that is  
slowly filling with smoke?

Perhaps both.

Such men most often  
look as if groan were all they could do,  
yet a woman, in spite of herself,

knows it's a tribute:  
if she were lacking all grace  
they'd pass her in silence:

so it's not only to say she's  
a warm hole. It's a word

in grief-language, nothing to do with  
primitive, not an ur-language;  
language stricken, sickened, cast down

in decrepitude. She wants to  
throw the tribute away, dis-  
gusted, and can't,

it goes on buzzing in her ear,  
it changes the pace of her walk,  
the torn posters in echoing corridors

spell it out, it  
quakes and gnashes as the train comes in.  
Her pulse sullenly

had picked up speed,  
but the cars slow down and  
jar to a stop while her understanding

keeps on translating:  
"Life after life after life goes by

without poetry,  
without seamliness,  
without love."

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