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To the Last Artful Man

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TO THE LAST ARTFUL MAN

Just as you say it could never happen to us,
I point to the men in white suits
who are crossing our lawn. Each carries a tray
of suspicious-looking instruments.
You say you need time to think

and go on eating your breakfast.
Through the window I watch them set fire
to the trees, the shrubs, now the rosebush
exhaling puffs of fragrant smoke.

When I open the door, one of them edges near.
He says we must get out immediately
and hands me a piece of paper
with signatures I cannot read. I shout at you,

“This is no joke!” but I can see you are not listening.
Already you have begun to perspire
from the smell of gasoline. Even as you sit
on the floor eating toast, your truculent
eyebrows are gone, all of your hair is gone

but a tiny patch behind one ear.
Soon, that too disappears. Your mouth opens
and closes as you begin to dissolve.
The tiny bones of your feet
strut in thin air. I gather what’s left of you

into a paper bag and together we drive
out of the city. I turn on the radio
because you have become so silent. Perhaps

you are sleeping, or trying to find an appropriate explanation. "Look," I tell you, "You must understand we are not the only ones. We must decide, are we victims or survivors?"

Now we can see the lake
and the crowds of people already there.
Children play happily in the water. They think
they have come to the lake because it is Saturday
or someone's birthday. We join the others

passing coffee and sandwiches.
One of them points to a man sitting alone
in the lake. We think he must want our attention
the way his hat waves back and forth
in the air. We hope he is someone important,
an official or popular troubadour we should listen to.

We can see he is very excited
the way he skips across the beach,
tossing us each a fish that plops, succulent-pink,
into our hands. He tells us the fish
are everything. We must handle them carefully.
We must make them last the rest of our lives.