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Miss Biggs

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MISS BIGGS

Some said she only stumbled
or, *She was having a fit.* She did
totter there for a moment, the class
going quiet, wondering
if this was for effect. Then she started up again
as the tiny lights under glass
of a pinball machine will whirl on slowly,
my teacher, though I did not know it then,

beautiful in her desolation, in a print dress
matching
the liver spots flecked over her arms, somehow,
still alive
in the midst of our savagery and boredom. Some said
her mind seized, the way an engine
clenches at its heart,
but it was arcing, electric, clearly there was
movement, her limbs fluttering, her eyes

reaching back. *As a young woman,* she says, stops
and stares at Jerry Zuniga, his huge half-back frame
folded into a desk, as if she knew his face
would collapse inward that spring
like a rotting pumpkin—leukemia,
a word that was opening before us like a flower,
her lips trembling now, the petals of a flower
battered by rain. *Deep,* she stutters,

in the down-hung apple branches

dusk gathered. Swallows came clustering like bees.
And we think it's all right. *Jesus, it's one of her*
poems or another
hard luck story. She whirls
around once, as if looking for something
she has lost. *The sun*
going where it must, she says this,
before sprawling

across the green and white checkered linoleum,
the ambulance people and the principal
in his worried brown suit and his brogues of
authority,
shouting us out of the room, some of the girls
refusing, some crying
all of us gawking and swallowing
though, now I think, not really caring very much.
We were there, she breathes. *Oh, it was sometime*

during the depression, the men all gone, useless
and ruined. Women
with their hair streaming;
oh god, can you imagine such women,
our skirts full of fruit, standing there, silent
by a bend in the river, leaves
scattered over the surface,
swirled and glinting in sunlight.