

Barry Dempster

The Night I Almost Choked

The night I almost choked on *Tylenol*,
a tiny voice swore it wasn't so hard to die.
Just a caplet rolled to the back of my throat,
windpipe door wide open. A gasp
that any other time would have been a breeze,

a gust of August on a deck ringed with
wine glasses and blonde hors d'oeuvres.
Who knew that breath could bump against
a wall, be catapulted back to a blue ledge of lips?
Who knew that small could be hugely lethal?

At first, I didn't say a word, panic
such a private place. Then I thought of waving,
rushing time along like a gang of unruly children,
clearing a path for ancient truth. *It's stuck*,
I finally said, meaning oh so many things.

Coughing, almost crying, pointing at
my Adam's apple as if it were a magic trick,
I was a round of *Charades* run amok.
What? someone said, shorthand for *Oh, bother*.
It's how I learned to die quietly, let the blue

seep in like the Eastham tide, inch by
inch. The Tylenol, my little secret rope
hanging from a hickory tree, my lethal injection.
Quivering, almost cracking, I grasp my wine glass
for a toast: *To breathless limitations!*

A clumsy swallow, like a vampire sipping
the last remaining vein. The caplet holds against
the flow, then budes, breaks away, swims
for that great sea of belly. Do I pretend
it was nothing but a blip? Do I bully the moment,

tell it as if it were already a poem?
Or do I close my eyes and pretend to be dead,
let it all make sense? The ghost of *Tylenol*
presses against my every breath
as if God had made a thumbprint out of air.