

Heather McHugh

WE CAN'T COME CLOSE

It's hard if not
impossible to pose
as dead. If burglars
broke and entered my
abode, desired my night,
approached my bed, and if I did my personal best
impression of a lifeless body, I don't think,
even on pain of death, I'd be
convincing. When we decided we would have to put

the dog to sleep,
past sleep, I mean,
my decade's love and I,
it was our last and most
resigned alliance. She received
the shot head down and quiet (she'd been sick)
and then she shook, shockingly, for seconds, and then

was clearly something else. Her stillness went beyond
the stillness of the sick, or the admonished, or the sleeping—
gravity invaded every cell. She'd never hung
so leaden, so undone. Her way of holding up
against the quantity of quiddity (is that
the deadest language for it?) all was gone.
And so her parts—not just the obvious
eyes and tail (where men
read meaning in a dog) but even
lips and chin were leaden dead-weight,
downright dirt-bound.

Of a life of losses
I had always made
high drama,

ruins to rise from,
hurts for curtain call. But at
our weariest (in drooping dug, in low-ball hell)
we're never numb enough, we don't know
far to fall. Of less and less,

there's more to come. Dead's downer than
sad—and then some.

AFTER A SECOND

The wind was racked, the water rocked,
the one by branches and
the other by degrees.
Clark's ledge disclosed

itself, like clockwork, twice
each day. The only ideas
were the daughters of delay. A headland wood
would split, and double over. Over

depth of dead leaf, shallowness of shade
stood lumber (all uncut, enough
for thieves galore) with no
nails yet, no men to correct for—

either in scale, or
in skew. I meant to bed
my half-light only, hide my hide.
The hood, the wooden