

SARA LONDON

*The Poet*

*In a murderous time / the heart breaks and breaks /  
and lives by breaking. —Stanley Kunitz*

A man decides to die. Enough  
is enough. He is ninety-seven,  
after all. Time to leave this  
world, his beloved's badgering,  
the terrible bombs in Baghdad,  
even his poems. His family  
of bones can no longer hold  
up the tent, so to speak. He is  
finished with eating. "I'll say  
my good-byes now," he tells  
his daughter who has flown in  
from California. One by one  
they come through the door  
of his Village apartment  
where he waits propped  
in his hospital bed like  
a pale king. "It's a wake!"  
says his hunched-over wife.  
One comes all the way from  
Virginia—drove through the night—  
and seeing his old mentor,  
sits heavily on the bed and breaks  
into sobbing; he can't get out  
a word. The old man,  
whose eyes are closed, takes  
the sad one's hand, squeezes it,  
"My legs—" he says. "You're  
crushing my legs!" Everyone  
is relieved. And it is quiet  
again when another storms in,  
railing that no one told him  
until today. "How long has he

been this way?" he shouts  
at them all. The old man's  
eyes remain tightly shut;  
when the loud one departs  
with his noise, the dying one's  
eyes pop back open. And still  
they come, with their long thick  
hair, the young women, one  
bearing lavender from his  
faraway summer garden.  
(It is March, and lavender is all  
that's yet greened against  
the stubborn chill.) The lavender  
girl rubs his thin left arm, careful  
not to crush it, as his editor  
gives him Chinese foot massage.  
Another presses her thumbs  
into his temples and pushes  
them this way and that.  
"Who called you?" the wife  
asks a woman on the couch.  
The daughter clings to her  
little cell phone. They come  
from New Hampshire,  
Massachusetts and New York.  
The old poet feels rumbling  
in his belly. Maybe I should  
eat something, he thinks,  
a little rice, a little fish.  
Now he sits on the edge  
of his bed, stands on his feet.  
The visitors note that the  
engines are going again,  
so to speak. They smile  
back and forth. There are  
phone calls. "He's eating,"

they say. "He gets up to go  
to the bathroom." They  
watch to see if he will go into  
that other room, his "cell."  
They must get home  
to their children, jobs, news  
of the war, their poetry, too.  
He puckers his lips for their kisses.  
"He didn't mean it," says his  
wife to no one in particular,  
sitting with her blind eyes  
closed. There is a lot  
of head shaking. His  
birthday is in July.  
While everyone is away,  
crocuses, little bayonets of  
desire, let's say, break through  
barriers of garden mud. The  
"stinkpile" hums against  
the summer house—he can hear it  
across the Hudson, across two  
states, truly. He dreams  
of the small, bloodless planet  
of the olive, smooth in his  
five o'clock martini, smells  
something, sweet, *Lavandula*  
*augustifolia* comes to mind.  
The tide, a mere two months  
away, in and out, out and in  
for God's sake!        The vision  
pulses erratically—my heart,  
he thinks (eyes flashing,  
shoulder hitching up  
in anticipation)—my heart  
could not be readier  
to break again.