Bill's Story - Mark Doty

When my sister came back from Africa, we didn't know at first how everything had changed. After a while Annie bought men's and boy's clothes in all sizes, and filled her closets with little or huge things she could never wear.

Then she took to buying out theatrical shops, rental places on the skids, sweeping in and saying, I'll take everything. Dementia was the first sign of something we didn't even have a name for, in 1978. She was just becoming stranger—

—all those clothes, the way she'd dress me up when I came to visit. It was like we could go back to playing together again, and get it right. She was a performance artist, and she did her best work then, taking the clothes to clubs, talking, putting them all on, talking.

It was years before she was in the hospital, and my mother needed something to hold onto, some way to be helpful, so she read a book called Deathing (a cheap, ugly verb if ever I heard one) and took its advice to heart;

she'd sit by the bed and say, Annie, look for the light, look for the light. It was plain that Anne did not wish to be distracted by these instructions; she came to, though she was nearly gone then, and looked at our mother with what was almost certainly annoyance. It's a white light,

Mom said, and this struck me as incredibly presumptuous, as if the light we'd all go into would be the same.
Maybe she wanted to give herself up
to indigo, or red. If we can barely even speak
to each other, living so separately,
how can we all die the same?
I used to take the train to the hospital,
and sometimes the only empty seats
would be the ones that face backwards.
I'd sit there and watch where I'd been
waver and blur out, and finally
I liked it, seeing what you've left
get more beautiful, less specific.
Maybe her light was all that gabardine
and flannel, khaki and navy
and silks and stripes. If you take everything,
you've got to let everything go. Dying
must take more attention than I ever imagined.
Just when she'd compose herself
and seem fixed on the work before her,
Mother would fret, trying to help her
just one more time: Look for the light,

until I took her arm
and told her wherever I was in the world
I would come back, no matter how difficult
it was to reach her, if I heard her calling.
Shut up, mother, I said, and Annie died.