

# Extract of Don't Let Me Be Lonely by Claudia Rankine

There was a time I could say no one I knew well had died. This is not to suggest no one died. When I was eight my mother became pregnant. She went to the hospital to give birth and returned without the baby. Where's the baby? we asked. Did she shrug? She was the kind of woman who liked to shrug; deep within her was an everlasting shrug. That didn't seem like a death. The years went by and people only died on television—if they weren't Black, they were wearing black or were terminally ill. Then I returned home from school one day and saw my father sitting on the steps of our home. He had a look that was unfamiliar; it was flooded, so leaking. I climbed the steps as far away from him as I could get. He was breaking or broken. Or, to be more precise, he looked to me like someone understanding his aloneness. Loneliness. His mother was dead. I'd never met her. It meant a trip back home for him. When he returned he spoke neither about the airplane nor the funeral.

Every movie I saw while in the third grade compelled me to ask, Is he dead? Is she dead? Because the characters often live against all odds it is the actors whose mortality concerned me. If it were an old, black-and-white film, whoever was around would answer yes. Months later the actor would show up on some latenight talk show to promote his latest efforts. I would turn and say—one always turns to say—You said he was dead. And the misinformed would claim, I never said he was dead. Yes, you did. No, I didn't. Inevitably we get older; whoever is still with us says, Stop asking me that.