

Eleanor Hardy

Sestina to an English Teacher

I wondered if
you hated words—
those words that you could
say by heart—the ones you save
inside your head for your
gawping students, that define your life.

Your young voice brought old words to life,
age only antique, frailty perceivable only
by sight. For you these words
Were nature, these forms so often taught that you could
chat in verse, speak in poetry, you could save
these dying words with your

endless life. I wondered if your
thinning blood resented life,
words mocking your condition—if
you knew we saw you through your words
and your sardonic jokes, could
see your hands shake, could not save

the hair on your head from pallor, save
you from admiring recognition as your
skin faded, white. That was not your life.
That shadow of your life was only—
is only—the memory of kind words
fixed to a comforting face that could

keep its humour through elegy and tragedy, could
smile and tease and pass on courage, save
our grades and your dignity, your
inspiration, your endless, relentless love of life.
I never could work out if
you hated my words,

the words on tragedy and elegy, words
you praised so much—if you would
think I'd misunderstood if I saved
myself from regret, if I used them to save your
voice, your image, tried to save your life—

if only
words could
save your life.