

POETRY

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A Dutiful Daughter

I drive through the dark October night,
A waning moon my only companion.
My mother lies dying in a nursing home
Four hours away.
“Come now,” they said,
“If you want to see her again.”

She must not die among strangers.
I will make up for the years of neglect
When the only solace I offered
For her loneliness and suffering
Were dutiful letters,
Brief visits,
Distracted phone conversations.
I will be with her now.
I will see her into the next world
As she saw me into this one.

She looks like a newly hatched bird
Fallen from the nest,
Hairless, toothless,
Eyes half closed, unfocused.
Or a fetus expelled too soon
From the womb,
Blue veins visible beneath the transparent skin,
Curled up in a coma on the nursing home bed
Where for two years
She has ranted and raged
In a language all her own
Against the injustices of life.

But now the only movement
 Is the opening and closing of her mouth
 Like a fish on the floor of a boat,
 Gasping for air to keep the pilot light burning
 In a body that's already past
 Its due date.

The night nurse tells me
 That hearing and touch are the last to go
 So I talk to her and touch her all night long
 Until, at last, dawn illuminates
 The brilliant autumn leaves
 Outside her window,
 And the nursing home
 Stirs into life.

They come to see her one last time:
 Kitchen help, cleaning ladies,
 Aides going off duty.
 They yell loud enough to wake the dead,
 "Hello Liddy! How are you, dear?"
 They kiss her forehead, stroke her cheek,
 Murmur words of endearment.
 "Isn't she sweet?" they whisper to me.
 I am amazed
 That they should love this woman,
 For whom people were either blood or not-blood.
 In the end, not-blood was her family.

My sister arrives flustered
 From her Florida vacation,
 Cut short after just one day.
 It's half past another midnight
 And I've been here for twenty-four hours.
 "Come home and sleep a bit," she says,
 "They'll call us."

The call comes at five thirty-four
And we're hurrying out to the car again
In the pre-dawn darkness,
Autumn leaves blowing round our feet,
Sticking to the wet windshield
As my sister pulls out of the driveway
And heads for the nursing home
Minutes away.
I will be with her when she dies.

When we enter the room
She is propped up in bed,
Teeth bared, lips pulled back,
A hideous grinning death's head.
"We have to put their teeth in right away,"
The attendant apologizes,
"Before rigor mortis sets in."
I overcome my revulsion
And kiss her still warm cheek
Soft and smooth as a baby's.

Why didn't you wait for me?
I was going to hold you in my arms.
I was going to make up for everything.

She doesn't hear my unspoken words,
She doesn't even hear my sobs.