

“107”

By Stephen Jon Cribari

“Another five days, I think. Maybe a week.
I’ve seen this all before. Go. Come back.
She’ll be here.” The nurse had said.

I went.

#

At what moment exactly did she die?
Sometime between the time they closed the door -
Sometime when I had ceased to be earthbound,
Was breaking heavenward in a plane, journeying
Without incident in relative ease -
And arriving at my expected destination
She was breaking free of accepted chains:
Us; who at the end were holding-on
Standing dockside as the ship set sail
(How it slipped its mooring on the tide!)
Waving frantically for one more glance
One more sign of recognition one
More proof against the bond breaking.
And she, so long ago inhabited
With this journey over the chartless sea,
She had to turn again, and smile, and wave
Another good-bye, and feel again the bond
Break.

When did she die? The moment we
Were not and could not have been there:
A time that she could not be summoned back.

#

She was dead because her process of dying had stopped.
Up to that point in time she was “not dead yet.”
Or so they said, the blue-green orderlies
And white nurses who gathered at the desk
Over pages of patients and drugs and daily routines.
“How is one-oh-seven today?”

“Not dead

Yet.”

To this way of thinking she was not

Dead yet for much longer than the time
 Between take-off and landing. She had been afraid
 Of falling, of the arthritic knee giving way
 As she hurried herself along the little hall
 To the bathroom in the middle of the night.
 The fact is her living was coming undone
 For some time, breaking apart like a plane,
 Falling out of the sky and spinning away.
 "Have I shown you this?" she asked one day
 (How spindly were her legs, how puffed her knee,
 How mottled with little brown spots the back of her hands)
 As together we shuffled to the mantelpiece
 Above the fireplace we never used.
 Smiling like the girl that once she was
 Reaching out for candy perhaps or a doll
 In the corner shop eighty-five years before,
 She reached out and took up a photo and said:
 "This is Stephen, my son."

I'm Stephen, your son.

Utter incomprehension across her face
 Then fear furrowing into anxiety.
 "You're Stephen?"

Yes.

"My Stephen?"

Yes.

"I've two sons named Stephen? I didn't know.
 Why didn't someone tell me?" and she wept
 Like a child who missed the school bus far from home.

#

Dry creek beds, burnt red silt
 And yellow ochre winding through the blue
 Maze of slick rock canyons. I could smell
 The dry the desiccated twisted hulks
 Of desert cedars writhing out of the sand,
 Patches of green sprouting from fibrous bark
 Hot and hollow under the Utah sun.
 These cedars have a consciousness
 That channels water where it wants to bloom.
 Another way of saying this is that
 The cedar self-prunes by channeling drought

Through itself absorbing dryness like rain
 Channeling water to where it wants to bloom
 And as long as some part blooms, it's not dead yet.

#

After the surgery for her fractured thigh
 She went to a nursing home and there we saw
 How much drought there was, how little rain.
 It's one thing losing your mind wondering around
 Your own house puzzling out where you are.
 It's quite another in an alien space
 With people and a bathroom not your own
 And this was her great fear about old age,
 That she would go to a home.

"Who's gonna bring
 Me my food?" she would ask and wring her hands and stare
 And her lip would tremble. But it wasn't about the food.

#

Beds on wheels with aluminum safety sides
 Rattling along green tiled corridors.
 Nurses and orderlies pulling the curtain around
 The bed, and unfamiliar hands exposing
 And bathing and dressing because it was a job
 That paid good money. Standing outside your room
 I heard you cry when they moved you to change the sheets.
 I had never heard you cry from physical pain.
 It sounded different from the other crying.

#

Easter Sunday. The Community Room.
 A maze of chrome and spokes and folding chairs
 And you, dressed up, hair newly washed and permed
 And eager like the girl that you were once.
 "It's Easter Sunday," proclaimed the priest. "Rejoice!
 Rejoice! For the Lord is risen!"

"The Lord is missing?"

Utter incomprehension across her face
 And fear, furrowed into anxiety
 And eating away the corners of her eyes.

#

"We had a fortune teller during the war,"
 She told me once. "One evening, just for the fun.

He read my palm but wouldn't tell me my fortune.
Bad things would happen was all he said."

And did they?

"Yes."

The baby she carried when her fortune was not read
Was not born, dying still-born at full term,
Another living eight weeks with a hole in the heart
And after it died my father built a house
Built a house for her with his own hands
And for the next fifty years she belonged to it
And he belonged to her and that house
The sure certain center of his life,
Until the night she did not know where she was.

"When do I go home?"

"You are home, doll.

You've lived here for fifty years. With me."

"I have?"

"Christ, get with it! Pay attention."

"No.

I mean the other home. The real home."
He went to see her every day his hope
Equal to his fear and both growing
Like her belly with the still-born baby grew,
And grew, until she gave birth to nothing.
After she died the house held on to him
And he held on to the house till the only thing worse
Than holding on was actually letting go.
He wandered from room to room writing love
To her in little notes. She was everywhere
But nowhere, and he wandered around in place
Till his heart broke apart and fell out of the broken sky.
He came every day, and on those days
She asked him who he was he sat and cried
Like he cried when he carried the casket to its grave
With the child inside dead from a hole in the heart.

#

The nursing home had lawns and terraces
And slanted sunlight on summer afternoons.
Sitting reading the paper she looked that day
Twenty years younger, and reading every word

Out loud and the nurse tucking her in and smiling
 And I could see she didn't understand one word
 Of what she read.

“Look,” said the nurse. “Do you know
 Who this is?”

“Sure,” she said, and looking up
 Smiling: “This is Stephen. He was my son.”
 She was lifetimes old as she took my hand
 And stroked it over and over and over and said
 “If I don't feel you, how will I know how to love you?”
 And I was certain she did not know who I was
 And equally certain the Lord was not missing.

#

Darkness earlier now and darker the nights.
 The November wind ripping through the trees
 Blowing dead leaves and litter down the street.
 She spent more time in The Warehouse, in that room
 Where inmates eat and sit in assigned places
 At long tables, reminiscent of the lunchroom
 In grammar school where we waited for the bell to ring.
 There she was, shrunken and tiny and sitting
 In her wheelchair in her assigned place waiting
 Weaving a paper napkin into itself.
 Next to her a woman screaming I-
 Want-this and I-want-that, where's-so-and-so;
 Another rocking back and forth repeating
 The same numbers over and over and over;
 And mom just weaving and looking feeble and old
 Across from the used up skin of an old man
 Who spent his days drooling onto his hands
 Splayed out on the table before him unmoving palms down.
 And she leaned forward and slowly reached across
 And quietly took hold and held his drool-wet hand.
 Whose hand was she holding? My father's? Mine?
 Someone she remembered that none of us ever knew?
 “If I don't feel you, how will I know how to love you?”

#

Then she stopped eating and her only liquid
 Was water on a sponge wiped across her lips.
 The desert cedar directing water and drought

Through itself with one eye closed forever
 And one eye half-open but hazy to the light.
 White skin in a white bed, white
 Hair matted to a skeleton face.
 On a chipped maple table beside the bed
 A photograph she may not recognize,
 At the foot of the bed flowers she may not see.
 Pale green clinical walls in a dying room,
 A greasy window hiding the grey outside.
 I sat beside her, took hold of and held her hand.
 Translucent weightless parchment-paper skin
 And of what good now is knowing how to love?

#

“Go. Come back. She’ll be here.” I went

And flew right back, arriving at the Home
 In time to find them wheeling her body away,
 The wheels of the gurney spinning across the floor.
 Gaping and fidgeting inmates, those who saw:
 The scared look of children who recognize
 That something has happened something might be wrong;
 And in The Warehouse the old man drooling alone;
 And the woman rocking in her assigned place;
 And the woman screaming; and gathered around their desk
 The white nurses and blue-green orderlies,
 Noting in their book of days and drugs
 That one-oh-seven is no longer not dead yet.