

Nursing Mother

I.

She suffered a bad spell—shaking,
nausea, blood pressure soaring; thinks
it's a reaction to her new anti-fibrillation
medication (which I've finally learned
to pronounce: AM-i-O-de-rone). We've
been waiting for the doctor to return our call.
But now, at 4:30, everything is set,
at least until some other symptom comes along.
We'll cut the dose in half, which ought to work.
Mom seems back to normal—just the fog
her eyes can barely see through, a walk
from bedroom to kitchen which
forces her to go lie down again.
(Yesterday, she said, she could not
summon up the energy to squeeze
the paste onto her toothbrush.)
Dad can manage for a time.

II.

So, a little later than I'd planned,
I step out from this house we moved to
more than forty years ago,
at Thirty-three Thirteen Harrell Street.
It was only weeks before I turned
thirteen, on the thirteenth
of September. I remember thinking
that so many tens plus three must
surely be a cosmic sign—although
I never did find out what kind.

I head right, toward Connecticut Avenue.
It was a meadow then where I could
talk with robins foraging, and sparrows;
or stalk six-legged creatures lured by flowers—
to murder in a jar with carbon tetrachloride
fumes, mount on pins, in boxes. Now
four-wheeled beasts, stampeding by,
collect their bugs on windshields.

Across Connecticut I find Atherton
Drive, which stirs a recollection.
Oh yes, I had a friend who played clarinet
to my fiddle in the high school orchestra.
We used to hang out at his house, with
games of chess, and Mozart. I did not

yet enjoy a poet's mind—although
like a poet's mine did tend to wander.
I wouldn't concentrate sufficiently
on chess and often made that fatal blunder.
Mozart, however, always was
himself . . . and Bach sometimes.

III.

“Why can't they give me something
that will make me feel less miserable?”
Before I left Mom asked me this, not for
the first—or second—time since morning.
(She's been talking of a hospice,
where they'll shoot her up with opium.
But hers is not, I think she knows,
the kind of pain that qualifies.)
“You just don't understand,
nobody can” and then: “I'd settle
for the terrible I felt last week”—
a thought I've heard each week for years,
as strength ebbs, day by day.
This time she adds: “I do not
want to go on living if I have
no hope of ever feeling better.”
But the songbird of death
has not yet perched on her shoulder.

IV.

I remember now, he lived off to the right,
just north of Weller Road,
which runs parallel to Harrell.
I choose the opposite direction
and walk a few more paces when
a flash of fragrance halts
all thoughts of chess or long-
lost music-making friends,
as I discover overhead some tiny
holly blossoms—scent descending
gently on the breeze. Eyes closed
I'm back in Brooklyn, standing in
the yard that I know best, where another
holly dwells and fills the air
with its perfume this time of year.

I come upon a street I've never seen
before called Barbara Road.
This makes me think of Barbara
(for the first time since how long ago?)

and nights when we made dream-like love as I
lay, lonely, in an adolescent's potent bed.

V.

I telephoned to wish a happy Mothers Day
and found, instead, the hospital. A heart
fluttering like huddled feathers through
an autumn gale, but the cardiologist
declares that he can keep it tuned—while
the cancer team still celebrates their casting out
of all esophageal demons months ago.
So why is she more feeble now?
The specialists don't seem
to even comprehend my question.
I'm still looking for a physician
who can find a name for her disease
other than: "Well, she's getting old, you know."

VI.

Where Randolph Road and Viers Mill meet
I turn around, since if I wanted streets
with sounds of traffic I could have stayed
in New York City. Soon
it will be time to prepare dinner—
in case mom's stomach is feeling better.
Dad will probably be hungry too.

But then, two blocks from home I spy
a robin's tragic wing lying on the sidewalk.
Feathers and a little muscle still cling to
the bone, along with just a bit of rusted breast.
Perhaps the rest was eaten by a mother cat,
whose body then produced
the milk her suckling kittens craved?
Whatever happened, suddenly
I comprehend the reason why
while walking, peacefully,
as evening overtakes the day,
I've noticed everywhere
how the azalea blossoms fade away.

Steve Bloom
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