

ONE

The eternal mystery of oars
Plowing back as the boat floats forward,
So our deeds and words plow toward the past
For the body to go forward with the person
inside. —Yehuda Amichai from *The Eternal Mystery*

I OPEN THE BEDROOM DOOR and come upon my mother as she is pulling an ivory cotton knit sweater over her head. Her bra, her panty hose, her skin, all are ivory. Around her head and completely enclosing it is a large mesh hood zipped down the middle of her face. Protected as a beekeeper, her features are barely perceptible. Her makeup will be intact. Lipstick will not smear nor powder dust her clothes. She is, for a second, immobile: a ghost surprised by her progeny.

She emerges “nicely put together,” one of her favorite phrases.

She’s wearing her wig, ordered some years ago from a catalog. At this age it makes her look pinched. She takes pride in maintaining her possessions, faithfully placing the wig each night on a longnecked Styrofoam head, something like a classical Roman bust but very light to carry.

Today she puts the head in a shopping bag and gives it to my father, who takes it downstairs on the elevator along with her overnight bag. In a few minutes the buzzer rings, signaling that he has brought the car around.

On the trip to the hospital, it is I who drives, silently rehearsing for an explosion that may come when my father notices I'm taking a route different from his own. My father is sitting beside me, my mother in the back, the three of us in a very different configuration from the way we sat on our weekly drive in our 1950s Buick with its mighty fins. Then I was in the middle, dying for air. My mother would be looking out at Boston's suburbs—Newton, Wellesley—charmed names of towns where she wished she lived. She'd point out a handsomely carved fence, an especially beautiful fanlight above a door painted colonial red.

“Those aren't houses for just anybody,” she'd say.

She'd also admire more modest one-family homes with pleasant yards, maybe an occasional magnolia with buds swollen to the size of eggs, or a doorstep on which a Halloween jack-o-lantern could be placed; the kind of house her friends lived in, the ones who had married what in her eyes were successful men.

“I bet they're not as nice as our apartment,” I'd say, wanting to cushion my father from the rebuke implied in her envy.

“That's a beautiful color,” I'd say too, wanting to make my mother feel appreciated for her fine eye, even for the justice of her longing.

On good days, my father would turn to my mother and croon their song, “I'm in love with you, Always, With a love that's true, Always...” She'd put her hand on his knee.

“Oh, Lou.”

My father would send my mother hugely oversized flowery valentines. Sometimes she'd stand behind him when he was sitting at dinner and lean over to kiss the top of his bald head. “I love the smell of you,” she'd say,

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at those moments unlike herself much of the time, when headaches made her flinch from light and touch.

On other days, my father would spot an alluring side road and make a quick swerve, often in the face of a car coming toward us. I'd be thrilled at the prospect of seeing something new. My mother, though, would make a fearful little gasp.

“Lou, what are you doing?”

Behind us, the horn of a car sounded.

Over his shoulder, my father called, “You jackass.”

“Sh-sh,” my mother said.

The angry driver had passed. “You moron,” my father yelled.

My mother kept sh-shing him.

He shook off her hand.

“Don't sh-sh me. Stupid idiot...”

“Stop it!” my mother ordered, as though speaking to an errant dog.

His face got redder and redder.

“Get out. Both of you.”

I kept my hand on the door handle, in case. Only when I could see our own building did I let go. My mother loosened her thumb from inside her fist.

I drop them off at the main entrance to the hospital, waiting to see my father propel my mother safely through the revolving door before I spiral up the garage, its too-narrow turns requiring both hands on the wheel, a parking ticket clamped between my lips. I gather up the bag with my mother's nightgowns, her toiletries carefully packed in a clear plastic case, and head to the lobby.

As I wait for the elevator, I look around. Beside me are men and women in their forties and fifties, all carrying something: shopping bags, flowers. They look

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worried as I am, a weary congregation at this particular time in our lives.

The next day when I take the elevator to her floor, the door opens to a long corridor. My mother pads toward me in her velour slippers and mandarin-collared robe with imitation satin trim, an empress of straitened means.

Growing up, I assumed illness was normal. Only when I began to hear about friends' families did I realize that they took health for granted.

My childhood trained me to see the wince hidden under the public face. It made me aware of how much ordinary pain there is in the world, made me question why so universal an experience is so little acknowledged.

We need new words for illness, not to be drawn from the lexicon of complaint or from the book of invalidating phrases: Have I used up my "sick days"? Am I sick enough?

Sorry, I'm a little "off" today. Get better.

We need subtle words that allow for degrees between healthy and sick, descriptive words for naming the in-between states where we spend much of our lives. We obscure these states with silence, or catchalls—"I'm not feeling well"—but our lives are more complex. They ask not for confession, but for calibration, so that we may tell one another how we are.

We need a new language for pain so we don't experience it as simply a message delivered by an insulted nerve. Instead, the message is made up of a vocabulary of singular words that, when near one another, let us read pain as a story of all that has happened in our lives.

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The phone rings. I jump up to answer it: a relative wanting to know where she should send flowers. I stand in my parents' kitchen chatting, not too happily but wanting to keep my end up. This one's a talker. "I have to get off now, but thanks so much, I know my mother will be pleased." Ha! She'll say, "That one only calls when there's trouble."

My father is sitting opposite me at breakfast, his hairy shoulders sticking out from his undershirt like fenders on an old car. Out of nowhere he begins to yell at me in a tone that a hack driver might use toward a recalcitrant horse. "There is one thing I'm going to get you to do, no matter what!"

I say nothing. Inside I feel like a rebellious adolescent.

"Your mother's the same way! When you talk on the phone, you sit. Not stand. You hear me? You and your mother are the same. Chairs are for sitting. I'm training her...and you're going to do the same thing."

I'm open-mouthed. Then: "No I am not. I stand when I speak on the phone. You are not training me. Okay? Understood?"

I phone my Aunt Minna, who says, "He's never been able to handle frustration. And it's worse now that he's had the strokes. Please, don't take it personally."

My father has fallen asleep in the big electrically powered chair that tilts downward so that he can ease himself out of it. It is dark in the room, save for the lights of Boston spread over the hills. In the morning, he likes to stand at this window, watching the sun come up.

Out of the blue, my father says, "I was just watching that stupid film, *The Battle of Waterloo*...war, it's so stupid...why do people want to kill each other?"

Another night, I come in and he's sitting in the dark.

“I don’t know about getting old. Is it worth it?”

Another night: “What’s it all about? Who knows?”

Me: “I do.”

Just to give him some kind of answer.

He’d wake me early in the morning, before school, to go with him to buy meat for his grocery store. In the old market at

Faneuil Hall, we’d walk down aisles, between haunches hanging from hooks. My father would greet the butchers, stopping to exchange a few friendly words.

“This is my daughter.”

“Spitting image, huh Lou?”

They all wore thick gloves and knitted mufflers except for my father. He was the Good Guy; he also tried to be the Strong Guy. “Gloves? What do I need them for? I can’t feel a damn thing; I’ve got my own lard.”

They’d chuckle; one of the men would give him a fake rabbit punch to his belly. Then he’d change his voice to the serious, mellifluous tone he thought appropriate for men doing business and inquire about the union boss or the price of lamb.

At the end of an aisle, we’d come to a large wooden door with a steel spring latch. When the door swung open, the inside sent out steam, like breath makes on a cold day. My father took me around to the shelves lining the walls, pointing out sections where cuts were kept, different grades of ribs, legs, shoulders. We’d stay in the freezer for as long as we could, until my father would say, “Okay, babe, we’ve had enough.”