

Visiting My Sister Isolated by Covid-19 in The Gardens at DePugh Nursing Center

Like a burglar casing out a house, I've been peering through a window for months, but today I can visit Mary Alice if she's wheeled to a gazebo by her aide. Her face, a gravestone weathered to a blank stare, I'm unable to quarantine my heart as her lips droop when I tell her who I am. Preserved by the salt air, her skin is smooth like chambered timbers of a hulk that's been filled then emptied over years by seawater. Some part of her brain must still hold the will she had to be beautiful even when a tumor growing there has been scoured first by radiation and then rounds of chemo. Unlike a trawler stranded on sandy flats, low tide does not uncover portholes into her mind. Reminding her I sucked my thumb, had to wear wide-calf boots in high school doesn't salvage childhood's souvenirs. How long will the hull of her body refuse to cave, melt into Florida's foliage like a downed palm tree?

Unlike my mother, the tumor in my sister's skull is quiet, subtle. Although I was the one who needed it, Mary Alice beaded a bracelet for our mother with silver, blue and gold to pave her path to heaven. Not once did my mother give her the look she reserved just for me, sucking air through her teeth, eyebrows arched toward her scalp like a stretching cat. She never sniffed my sister's head like a melon checking hair for smell of cigarettes, Jack Daniels. pot. When I talked to boys on the phone, I stretched the spirals of black cord down the basement stairs. Hearing my whispers, she called me her misfortune, snatched the receiver so she could slam it down.

My sister would find it strange to learn I have kept the mask she wore molded to fit over her head and bolt to a hospital table during radiation. When she is no longer here, I will be able to stroke her acrylic cheeks, finger parentheses of the jaw bone. I'm glad now I resisted the urge to paint it like Spiderman or Batwoman. There are cut-outs for her mouth and nose, but none for her eyes, perhaps to prepare her for what cannot be seen. Unlike Cardea, Roman goddess of hinges, who had the power

to open what was shut, I cannot lift the malignant
mass from the socket of her brain so words
might leak out, sentences crawl up her throat.
Unable to decant herself into another vessel,
if Mary Alice had something to ask me, some
knowledge to impart, she has lost it now.