

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Sharon Cramer

It begins

A phone message from Chicago on December 3

“Something’s wrong with Dad – he’s in the hospital having tests”

Suddenly every moment of living on shore ends and we are in the ocean
hearing the seagulls overhead cry

“He’s always been fine”

“Last time he was in the hospital he had his hernia operation
– that was forty years ago”

“After all, he’s 84”

“Is it serious?”

In the middle of a conference call two days later I hear the rest
cancer – doctors – stage 4

and transport myself to Chicago

where a doctor returns my call as I’m walking off the plane

primary site – metastasized – several treatment options – his choice

And there is no going back to dry land

There is no waking up in Chicago, in Buffalo, or in any city
to other news

of anything in the world at large

in the small world of work

at home

just the sea gulls screaming

“it’s serious”

“I told him to get his affairs in order”

“Come now. Even though he doesn’t want you to come, come now”

Fish we have all become

The air is no more for us

only going through each day’s density

“he’s better today”

“he’s got his appetite back”

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focusing all our attention
on learning to see
in the dark

He is a starfish we've only ever seen from the top
Suddenly he is on the glass and we can see underneath
too much
but he can't move

He wants to twist around, away from our scrutiny, but he is too weak
and we see what holds him to the glass

Before he can stop us we see it all

Before we can stop ourselves we know it all and we can't unlearn it

For only one moment during the visit we turn back into humans
while I read him about the symptoms he should have noticed
but he only nods at "lower back pain" and "loss of appetite"

"How long ago did you lose your appetite? A month? Two months?"

"Longer."

"Last summer?" ("He's looking thin!" "He says he's on a diet.")

"About then."

And (if only I'd known) that is our last open talk about our illness.

Two weeks later, New Year's Day, he's become a clam

"I'm not discussing it" "I'll do what the doctors say" "I'm vunderbar"

and we are treading water on our own

gulping for air

tiring

watching him float away

further and further away

He waves "I'm vunderbar – don't worry about me"

Soon only his head is bobbing

as we watch him

wave to him

cry to him

until long after the sun goes down

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Finding the Hugs – 1

When I came to see you in March for three days

it was two months into your treatments

You were so thin

“Doesn’t he look fine?” “Doesn’t he seem ok?” “I’m vunderbar”

The tacit agreements to not discuss anything about illness I learned the hard way

Raised voices over a “what if…” question led to never again broaching the topic

In cotton in display cases we each stay alone with our thoughts

Separate and silent we talk about

- the weather
- the new family baby being born out west
- the new kitchen floor
- the war

Separate and silent the first day flies by

Just after dawn on the morning of the second day

the coffee I am drinking in your house tastes odd

I look at the date on the milk and realize why

“I’ll just duck out and get some fresh,” I say to myself and leave a note

in case you wake up and wonder where I’ve gone

In the car, on the road, all my old landmarks are gone

I drive south

and a supermarket with a vaguely familiar name pulls me in

Before I can say, “You’ve got cancer, I’m afraid you’ll die tomorrow” my cart is full

- cheeses
- miniature Dove bars
- nuts
- Oreo cookies
- crackers
- candies
- (oh yes) milk

Pushing this loot over to the only checkout lane

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I'm ready to build the house in which to lure you (and Hansel, Gretel, and a dozen others) to eat

The surmise of the enormous grocery clerk flickers across her face,

"Oh good, one of my people, out for an early morning binge"

"No," I say, even though she hadn't spoken, "It's not for me. It's for my father.

He's so thin. I'm hoping to tempt him to eat."

And all the unshed tears of the weekend come pouring out

not in discrete, ladylike form

but in heart-wrenching sobs

Crying into my hands, I do not try to stop them and they keep on coming

The clerk, with a knowing nod, says, "Honey, I've been there.

I'm going to come and give you a hug."

And I'm enveloped in breasts

and a back so large I can't get my arms all the way around her.

Arms are around me, patting me, comforting me,

and gradually my tears cease.

Ten Kleenexes later (her donation) she knows it all,

She nods and comments throughout while ringing me up

"I've been there" "I've been there" "I've been there"

When I'm ready to roll she motions over another clerk to take her register and says, "I'll walk you out."

She hefts the three large bags as if they were cotton balls

and strides out to the car with me

lifting them into the too-high truck of the rental car with graceful ease.

Patting me on the arm, she says knowingly,

"The Lord will provide you the strength you need to get through this.

The Lord will provide."

He just did.

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Visiting in July

The birds are silent still

this early morning

You are asleep upstairs

I can imagine dreams making your eyelids bounce with anticipation of the day ahead

I sit downstairs in your chair

my eyes touching each object with recognition

Looking is like touching, like a palpable experience

My mind trails – like too-long-pants trail in the dust –around the room and finds

our shared past

- Birthday books neatly on the shelves, gifts from my sister and me
- Travel books from wife #2, the oldest from 1998
- Art books purchased on trips with Mom
- Dusty liquor bottles which used to sparkle for the “drink before dinner” each night
- The afghan my mother knitted, just where she left it on June 6, 1981
- An inscribed copy of Ann Sexton’s *Live or Die* from her twenty year old daughter, on August 2, 1969: “To Mom – someday, I’ll give you my own book of poetry for your birthday. Love, Sharon”
- *All the President’s Men* which I’ve been watching lately, as the story is new again to this generation of world citizens
- The gifts I’ve given you over the last few years lined up on the table to the left of your chair

It is easier to let the things do the talking

We talk of the weather, the too-heavy suitcase, dinner tomorrow night

as if we have

all the time in the world

The clock is ticking

The weep-poor-willow is awake outside, calling out to see if anyone else is about

I hear your footsteps above me

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and wonder how many mornings more
we will have
to not talk of anything but

- the weather
- the traffic
- the war

Life races by
and we have hardly a moment to lose
What have you figured out in these 84 years that I should know?
Quick – tell me before it is too late
Quick – hug me before you can't anymore

Quick – quick – dry the tears – I hear you on the stairs

Quick – quick
Slow

“What's for breakfast?”

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Finding the hugs – 2

It is three months later.

Another “permitted” trip to celebrate all the birthdays in one efficient meal.

Happy, happy, happy, five events all rolled into one

Since the last visit the silence has grown even more austere so

- I pretend I am in St. Paul’s in London
- Hushed voices
- Look at the monuments
- Reflect silently on the power of the past to influence the future
- Read about the heroics of those who died young

Only a short conversation with an astute pharmacist “I see it all, I hear it all”

breaks the litany “Doesn’t he look fine?” “Isn’t he doing well?” “I’m vunderbar.”

Inching into my memory a remark my sister made years before

“I ran into our old neighbors – they moved away when we were 14 and 13 – she said next time you are in town, you should give her a call”

leads to a new thought

get out of the cotton, and the walking death, and re-enter the past

through a different door

A phone call from out of the blue is returned (with astonishment)

and I am welcomed into the new home of our neighbor of nine years

Standing at the door, optical illusions, unchanged voices, the same laughs

pull us through the present into the past

We agree – none of us has changed at all

Although we catch up (on 41 years) we intersperse what was with what is and what will be

No talk of illness

Honoring the threat (“If you tell anyone I’m sick, I’ll never speak to you again”) leads to an easy answer to the “How’s your dad?” question

“He’s fine – still working 6 days a week at 85!”

and we move on to the next topic

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Laughter, cashews, club soda, and a speedy, bumpy ride down memory lane brings us to today

"There are no friends like old friends," says the daughter, recently moved back to the area, my best friend in kindergarten and first grade

Hearing their voices, talking of my mother,

I touch again the past

The chance to get new hugs give me a moment to connect with authenticity and remember those old days

- In their sun room, we shared the first viewing of the Shirley Temple movies ("How did she learn all those lines?" "How did she learn all those steps?" "Isn't she younger than us?")
- In my best friend's room, we listened to records over and over. *South Pacific* (she had the Broadway album, I had the movie). *Peter Pan*.
- When I got my first brassiere, she wanted one, too.
- When my mother explained about the facts of life, I had to tell her, too, through the whole idea made no sense to either of us
- When she moved away to Wisconsin, we promised to write,
- and never stop being friends

"Old friends are the best friends."

Those hugs helped prepare me for

- the dinner
- the gifts
- the good cheer
- the too much food

until at last it is over

"No friends like old friends"

I smile to myself driving home – find those hugs where you can since "you can't always get what you want" "get what you need"