

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Robert Searway
Life and Breath

I sat in the midafternoon and listened to her breathing, because this has become my life now. The breaths. Rasping, short. Pauses between, long pauses that make me wonder for a moment, and then another like a gasp. She is lying there. This is life now. Jaw hanging open, teeth like a grimace. Skin pale, paler than I've seen. Hair a scraggly mess of grey. Eyes usually closed. When open, glassy. She'll look at you and yet you're unsure if she's aware anymore, of anything. She hasn't spoken an intelligible word in perhaps a week, but time seems to linger arrhythmic with the breaths. And God, how is this life now?

So I stand there, beside the bed, listening still. My own heart beating in rhythm, pumping the blood out to my veins. Her body wasted away, covered by the bed sheets. Devastated by the tumors, by the treatment, by the ruined intestinal tract and the lack of nutrition. Atrophied from lying there, struggling to breathe. I linger on each intake. Cheek bones protruding from thin face. The moments between stretch like they're the last, until she breathes, and I feel my body relax for a moment from the tension of listening, waiting. This is waiting, waiting, no longer life.

Friends come to sit, cry, stop thinking for a moment, because no future lies there. A year of struggle and the struggle will stop. Stop with a parade of aunts through the house. Sisters in law, sister. For in these moments there remains life. And I sit with nothing, perhaps knowing the future, or knowing its end, listening there in the constant dim, shut out from everything except the rasping breaths.

Think not of what will happen: fitting a black suit to rent for the day, a committal at the cemetery above the river, staring at the crafted wood coffin, laying the rose there, driving to the church, sitting amidst the quiet of my own numbness while the pews fill in behind somewhere, through songs, dad keeping himself together as he lightens the room with the story of when they met, her brother trying to sum up what it all meant, walking out as people look at you with their own pain and projecting yours, meeting in the banquet hall after to listen and talk and fellowship, leaving because its over.

Instead there are the final moments of these breaths. Rasping still, the sound of fleeting life. The first mark of the transition, though it will change once more to gasping and failing to grasp the air. Think of my own heart pounding, beating, carrying the blood out to the veins, with oxygen from the breaths. And this is life.