April, Thirteen

by Glynnis Eldridge

There is a roofer straddling part of our house, pushing shingles off of our roof with the edge of a shovel.

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I've thought seriously, at times, about becoming a nurse.

Seeing your mother in a hospital bed, hooked up to a tube, more than one, too many to keep track of and distinguish between. Where do they go? Which one leads where? Your mother's bare bottom uncovered by a hospital gown. All this from “twisty inner tubes”, and I can't help but wonder what I look like under my skin.

The hospital's complementary tea tastes like dog drool or morning breath. Maybe it is just the scent of styrofoam which clouds the taste of leaves, milk, sugar.

Your mother's heart monitor, pulsing, rising and dropping tones with speed, fluxes.

Let that gas go, the nurses encourage her. *Don't be modest.* She coughs and before she answers your question of, *do you need something to barf into*, her eyes are closed again and the nurse is telling you something important that you won't remember later.

A machine whirrs, hums, presses down on something. Her heart rate monitor squeals a little. The rise and fall of her pulse, the mountain range on the screen, plateaus. The nurse stops by and says, *well there, you passed gas*. She looks at her chart, puts it back in the clear plastic folder outside the room, and continues down the hallway to consult other sick people.

The color palette at the hospital is a cooling blue/violet. Nurses wear dark blue scrubs. The cabinet doors at their station are the same hue. In your mother's room, the cabinet doors are a lighter, gray-blue. The chair is indigo. The railing of your mother's hospital bed is a deeper, pale gray-blue.

Some people walk around without their shoes on. They parade up and down the hallway in their bathrobes and socks, heads up, backs straight, tall, proud to leave their beds and march around without

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assistance to new locations, like the single stall, private bathroom across from my mother's hospital room, directly across the hall.

Another nurse in dark blue scrubs comes in and pushes your mother onto her other side. She tells her, *don't be bashful, let that gas out!* Your mother groans and lifts her hand out from under the covers and you see a little red light clamped onto her fingertip and remember your grandfather, her father, whose jacket you are wearing, and who, last you saw him, had the same little red light on his toe. He had tried to pull it off. He was angry to be in the hospital, and as a patient, no less, where he had worked for most of his life, dying not far from where he had pulled so many babies into life.

You turn the page in your notebook and your mother relaxes her face. When she had turned over, she had wrinkled her nose and her laugh lines were deep and so were the lines in her forehead, between her eyebrows and under her nose. The nurse said, *oh yeah, you're getting the full work out today*. She left the room. On the other side of the curtain, two of them spoke about the need for wheelchairs.

For a moment, all of the machines spasm. The heart monitor rises and plateaus, falls, then flatlines for five, ten, fifteen seconds. You sit forward in your seat, you feel your heart race. You call out for your mother. You think about going into the hallway, asking for a nurse, but before you can say anything else, or stand, or think further about moving, the monitor is steady, moving again, and you sit back in your chair.

This happens again, later, while a nurse and someone else in the next room go over a checklist of drugs the someone has taken. She has taken at least 15 over her lifetime, all pharmaceuticals, all legal, all difficult to pronounce. When your mother's heart monitor plateaus again, you don't worry because she is scratching her head and pushing her hair out of her face. The machine didn't like this, and it dropped its tones and squealed. No nurses came to see what was going on. Your mother slept.

Your mother's heart rate monitor beats like a metronome. The person in the next room's monitor beats between your mother's

heart beats and you think about how heart beats sound collectively; the sounds of our bodies, a symphony of heart monitors.

You decide not to tell the nurse the whole truth about what you study. You don't tell her you more or less dropped out of college because you can't admit it to yourself. You do tell her that you're working on a creative writing project for a conference at Yale, and she says, *Oh, good for you!* She introduces herself as Cindy, and then says, *let's let her sleep. She should feel better when she wakes up.*

Her heart rate flatlines again, then jumps, drops, jumps, drops, back to the regular metronome. Your mothers face is scrunched again. The track her tears follow along the length of her nose is clear from where you sit. Her bangs fall just above her eyelid. She moves her hands under the covers. The machine whirrs, presses on something, the line jumps, drops, the tone rises, falls, back to the normal pattern. You think she looks like an infant.

Another patient in the hallway talks with an anesthesiologist about a time she woke up on one of Yale's operating tables in the middle of surgery.

Most of the time the heart rate line looks like the rock formations you've seen in Arizona, and the canyons you wanted to walk into. You imagine the canyons and rock formations like this throughout the southwest. You always want more time to explore than you allow yourself, mostly because you don't travel alone when you know you should, and partially because you have terrible time management skills.

Your mother buries her face under the blankets the hospital has given her. They are white, bleached, crisp. When you helped a nurse drape one more blanket over your mother's body earlier, you were careful to cover where her gown left her exposed. You noticed the blanket was heated- fresh out of the microwave. They had brought in a stack of these blankets and layered them over her, like lasagna, or the layered pastry you shared yesterday with a boy you let into your life a little less than two years ago, who tells you that you have Mona Lisa's hands.

When Cindy comes back she wakes your mother and has her turn onto her other side. She lifts the blankets the two of you draped over her and is careful to cover her behind while you stand on the other side of the hospital bed. She goes over instructions with you for how to care for your mother, and you think that maybe someone should have given you these instructions a long time ago. She asks your mother how she likes her tea, and she tells her that her blood sugar is fine, *it's about 190*, she says. Cindy asks me if I'll be with her all day, and I say y*es, essentially, aside from a two hour period when I'll be at work.* But she can call you, right? You won't be too far away? *No, I'll be close. I'll come back*. OK great. I'll be back in five minutes to turn you over again. My mother tries to communicate with the nurse as if there is really nothing wrong, as if she hasn't been asleep for hours, the way she does with me and my brother, from her dream control station that she operates with her eyes closed, half asleep, autopilot micromanagement.

The nurse leaves, your mother falls asleep again immediately, and you leave to use the bathroom.

You return and the heart monitor is beating quick, squealing, slowing down, dropping in tone to an A(b). It steadies again.

The nurse returns later, turns on the light and says *mornin' sunshine.* She raises the segment of the bed behind my mother's back and she is sitting upright. My mom is suddenly a baby or a senior citizen; the way she talks, the way she moves, the way her head falls back and hits the pillow behind her, the way she moves the muscles in her face. The way she sits unclothed on a special kind of waterproof mattress pad.

She points to the photograph on the wall to her left and says, *I think this flower is called columbine,* and then her head hits the pillow again. She says, *it's hard to think of a flower called columbine.*

My energy fades in and out and I ask for a slices of toast for me and her. *Cinnamon raisin would be great, yes, thank you.* I smell it cooking later.

My mother and I have been arguing for the last couple weeks and I haven't known how to act around her while she is asleep in her hospital bed. I said *hi* when I arrived and she said *hi* between breaths of sleep. I haven't said much else.

The hospital food is everything I wanted, and then some. The hearty breakfast I made after dropping mom off at the hospital this morning paled in comparison. I think it is the butter.

My mom says she has “no spit” and the toast is turning into clay in her mouth. By now I've already finished my serving and my energy has come back. My vision isn't fluctuating anymore and I offer to get her some water. It takes her some time to say yes, please, thank you.

She talks about how the chair I was sitting on is the same color as a couch we had downtown. She talks about how she lost a sock between her procedure and ending up in her hospital bed, and one of her feet are cold. She falls in and out of sleep. She says, “I don't handle drugs well.” She sits quietly and works on her toast. The nurse talks about a tiny hair clip on the counter behind her hospital bed; *oh how cute! Does it work? Don't bruise your arm now, poor thing.*

At home, mom stumbles out of the car, says hello to her favorite of the three roofers who have been here now for over a week. She says, *WOW, look at the mess!* She goes inside, makes some tea, stumbles up the stairs and catches herself. She opens the door to her bedroom, goes inside, closes the door, and then there is silence.

There are pieces of roof falling down around the house. The cat jumps up on the piano and falls back onto the floor, surprised by the sounds of the keyboard. He cowers by the window. He runs over to a chair in the living room, pukes up a hairball, and then walks over to another spot, and pukes again. At least he is a small cat with short hair. I clean up after him. He bats at my feet as I walk from the kitchen to the living room, to the kitchen, to the living room with fresh seltzer to pull his vomit from the threads of the rug.

Hours later, she is awake. I have gone to work, taught a course, provided critique and suggestions for tomorrow's class, and returned home. She tells me she is not hungry. She gets on her nordic track for 45 minutes. Yesterday she fasted and today she had toast. I sometimes worry about her but think of the heart monitor's squeal when she lifted her hand to push her hair out of her face. She tells her lover over the phone that she has been “vegging out.” I worry.

By now, the lady bugs that swarmed us have left their crisp, speckled bodies behind, and spiders now crawl along the walls, waiting for those still living. There were three wasps downstairs earlier this week. Two of them were trapped together in an upside-down glass, and another was trapped in its own. I live in a town that never planted trees. The valley next door is filled with them, and raspberry briars and thick, tall, dried grasses. At the top of the hill, there are no trees. I envy the neighbors I've never met. Their views are of the earth and sky, unmasked by tall plants or other homes. The sky is undivided: every hill is a cliff, every cliff is the edge of the earth. Every valley is an ocean, and every ocean is a mirage. On days when living here is too heavy, I want to roll down a hill, and fall off the edge off the earth, but I need to walk up the hill to get up there.

Sometimes I find myself driving aimlessly in the broken red car, hoping to find something new. The only exciting familiars are the changing sky, morning moons, and the dog who sometimes licks my face.

There are three wide winged birds who have recently begun daily meditations of circling our house, before flying over our neighbors, the valley, the hills and cliffs. My mom says that they are turkey vultures. She says that their job is to wait for things to die.

In the morning on the edge of the earth, you can see the moon; a soft, large, white, pockmarked cloud, perfect in shape, partially molded by the pull of us.