

The Slow Escape

This is the part where she curls in on herself  
in a slow, fragile dance

Houdini  
would despise.

It's been going on for years,  
a nightly performance  
with an audience of one or two,  
rabbits pulling us out of their hats,  
something clearly up their sleeves.

I know some tricks, too:  
I catch the moon in a bucket,  
pull a frog from my throat,  
yell until I'm horse and gallop away.

Nothing helps.

Houdini locked himself in a milk can  
with a hidden hollow space  
so he could breathe  
while he picked the locks.

You want trick handcuffs?  
Marked cards? Loaded dice?

I don't have any.

This disease knows all the secrets, anyway.

Now, pay close attention.

This is the hardest act yet.

The main actor  
does an imitation  
of my mom

as she smiles and laughs  
and lulls me with her patter,  
fading into a nothingness  
even Houdini could not escape.

Two Toothbrushes

She sang that crazy song  
when I was five:  
two toothbrushes fall in love,  
marry in haste, share the same toothpaste.  
How I'd brush and brush  
just to keep her singing.  
I am the blue toothbrush and she, the pink.  
She is such a sweet toothbrush.  
We've met somewhere before,  
by the bathroom door  
of my memory,  
my elbow jutting gently into her side  
with each brushing motion,  
and once I was the pink toothbrush  
glowing from her attentions,  
my nylons bristling and whistling.

I tell myself this song keeps her healthy.  
Or maybe I'm singing to relive that moment  
when I was still her child.

In the Beginning

they ask when she was diagnosed  
as if that was the beginning  
as if one day one noticeable event one small  
symptom drew our attention  
and we could pinpoint the first moment  
of her memory loss  
beginning middle end  
a logical concept—  
we only know middle  
time sliding through time  
no evident trigger  
no first domino  
signs piling up  
until they erupt into diagnosis  
we try to create  
beginning out of chaos  
but chaos  
already was

Solitary Alzheimer's

When the wind  
turns and says in my mother's voice  
*I am solitary next to you,*

I think these things:

She is two-thirds empty and one-third loneliness.  
And the two-thirds are her past and her future.

Or maybe its three-fourths exhaustion,  
her senses struggling to keep up.  
Or perhaps she is an instrument of God.

When the wind turns cold  
and says in my mother's voice  
*I am solitary next to you,*

I remember these things:

A mother's love  
is bananas and sugar mashed in milk,  
one cup worry, a pinch of grief, and what's left over  
  
sweetens the scones and conversation we shared.

And dreaming? Behind her drooping eyes  
is a place that is whole.

And loving? She kisses me  
as if I've been away for years.

When the waves of wind that rattle my windows say  
*I am solitary next to you,*  
I know it's me

or my mother through me, asking,

*Can you handle this loss?  
Will you forgive yourself if you break?*

Strange. A misplaced mother.  
A distracted daughter. A wind with a voice.  
And my heart talking to God.

*after Li-young Lee*

Lemons

Eight lemons fill the sink  
plucked this morning from my tree  
which we planted when we first arrived.

I wash them,  
roll them on the counter  
to make them pliant.  
A scented mist erupts from their peel.  
From one, I cut a small wedge  
to reveal delicate flesh  
as we are commanded  
because the Land is holy.

We squeeze the lemons,  
drink our fill of tart juice,  
grate the rind for zest,  
suck on the empty halves still laden  
with pulp, take what we love,  
carry within us this one tree,  
not only the fruit but its planting,  
not only its growth but its roots.

There are days we live this dream  
as if death is nowhere  
in the background, the joy  
of ripe lemons, fragrant fingers,  
a leafy tree with white blossoms,  
of having enough.

*after Li-Young Lee*