

Jude Nutter

Love like That

Cannula, from the Latin, means *little reed*,
and how could you not be thinking of the hero, ricocheting
through the forest, tailed by the enemy, then breaking
cover to find himself at the frayed margins of a swamp
where the water parsley and the hemlock are fuming
into the slow fireworks of their umbels, where,
on the first try, he severs a perfect length of reed and submerges –
simply sinks beneath the convenient surface of the water –
to breathe, calmly, through its long, hollow body.
But your mother was drowning anyway, propped up
on a pale talus of pillows, the twin stems of the cannula
looped demurely behind her ears, and you know, now,
that such escapes are not possible; that the burden
of water would be greater than the weight the sheeted
muscles of the diaphragm are designed to overcome.
Her room overlooked the hospital's high-walled garden
with its drapes of ivy from which a single robin kept flying
in red arcs of lament, breaking out from behind
the waxed latches of the leaves. Beyond, a field gone fallow,
and the white needle of an egret marking the river's
open seam, and little hiccups of colour as cars on the ring road
passed a gap in the hedge. She had no use for that garden
with its lavenders and jasmine and Black Knight buddleia.
And you never entered it either because, while she was dying,
you denied yourself the world on her behalf. It was later,
after she had gone into, and locked you out of,
the dirt's still house, and you had driven back to the hospital
with those oxygen tanks that had stood for weeks
like green torpedoes in the garden shed that you heard
from the nurses how on the morning when your mother's lungs
were drained for the last time and you'd sat watching
a robin slipping in and out of the ivy, your father had been told
that he could leave her, now, in that room, with its view
out over the garden toward the private triumphs of the yellow flag
and the bog cotton among the flare of standing water
in the field – it was, after all, close to the end. Or
he could take her home. And that your father had made them weep.

Home was the terminus of a long drive west through a landscape
imprisoned by the rain's long memory; mile after mile
of blind, sharp turns and wind-panicked grass until that short,
straight trough between the peaks of the Slieve Mish
where the way is always in shadow,
where the veil between the worlds is thin,
where a King of Munster had once built his ring fort
high on the slopes of Caherconree and then, every night,
set its stones spinning so no one could find its entrance.
Where ravens are busy still, building omens out of their bodies.
And so to arrive at last at a small house on the western edge
of a country, where the land's confident and green repose
finally gives itself up to the tireless, unbuttoning hands
of the sea. We talk about bodies of water, but how
can sunlight enter and unfasten such a body
until it becomes an other life whose grip we walk into
and out of all day at will. And we don't talk enough
about the moment when that light abandons the water
at evening and the sea, turning its back, becomes suddenly
secret and remote. And it's like a door closing.
It's like a heart shutting down. And too much has been said
about the boats casting off from the quay and leaving
the clutch of the harbor; all that tonnage –
blocks and shackles and nets – upheld and under power,
catching and riding the swells. But that's what they do,
those boats leaving the harbor – they head west
toward the hour of such abandonment. And that's exactly

what your father said – your father, his legs shredded
by German bullets when he was twenty, who walks
with a cane and a limp and leaves faint scuffs in the carpets
and the grass of the garden, who cannot lift
even the raked piles of papery sabres blown from the branches
of the cordylines or plastic pots of new-rooted fuchsia
for your mother's grave. He'd said that he wanted to take her home;
and that he would take her home, even if he had to carry her.