

In The Neurology Ward

GRACE COCKBURN

*Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.
There is no place here for the inexact
Praise of easy graces and sensuality of the body.
There is only time for this merciless inventory.
—from "Quarantine" by Eaven Boland*

My mother is held hostage to a brain tumour.
In the bed across the room
a young wife with Parkinson's
trembles into stillness. Her eyes complete the hug
her arms refuse to make.
She jokes about playing statues.
The husbands stand silenced, sigh
with the air-filled mattresses
that blunt the pierce of bones sharp in fragile skin.
Here, where it is needed most,
fear and grief conspire to
let no love poem ever come to this threshold.

Visitors take refuge in the cracks in bleached-out walls,
talk of ordinary things—how low the snowpack is
this year; the farmers' need for rain.
Doctors, nurses toss smiles to clear the air
of questions. Instead, they rattle numbers:
food in, urine out; respiration, pulse;
death's progress recorded at regulated intervals.
But the wild flutter of frightened eyes, the flight
of fingertip to mouth (a small, exquisite O),
the soul's silent tiptoe from the room—
these go unremarked.
There is no place here for the inexact.

My mother's whispers never cease; the tumour blunts speech,
her fear compels it. If I close my eyes I hear
the restless sea, the lisp of leaves on trees. I paint
her nails, arrange her remaining hair to cover the incision,
put makeup on the bruise. My father
brings a gardenia, orchid. He can't remember
which he gave her first, all those years ago, can't risk being wrong.
He puts *Shalimar* behind her ears, calls her *Johnny* as he used to;
kisses her goodnight, and when she says come back
he does, kisses her once more
and for a moment they are young again, lost in the
praise of easy graces, and sensuality of the body.
Later in the restaurant,
he discusses the merits of pork or beef,
compliments the waiter, doesn't eat;
returns to her bedside, her whispers,
her search for signs, a way out.
We hold her hands, hold each others':
The clock ticks behind our silence;
the tumour entwines one neuron, then another.
I want to climb to her lap, curl myself small,
hear her voice clear again, unhurried,
reading me a story. I want to forget that now
there is only time for this merciless inventory.