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A Posture of Grace

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KIM K. MCCREA

A POSTURE OF GRACE

- Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest -

APRIL SHATTERED AT my feet, a barnacled shell salvaged from a maze of days, days battling kelpies at the bottom of the sea. This morning, I look up to see it is May. The grass is thick, riotous and defiant. The buds of the honey locust tree, the last leaves to unfurl, open fists of gold, the misers. Rosemary is blooming and the rhododendrons shine like starfish. A black crow flies east against a white cloud, blue sky. I am prone to seasickness. I am back on land.

On the first day of April, I sat at my father's cluttered kitchen table and clutched the edges like a tipping raft, fighting to keep my balance.

In my father's house, keeping watch. Walk him, faltering and wizened, to the toilet. Inspect his leavings expecting to read an oracle: tea leaves, this is, omens found in flights of birds. In two weeks, he will be the same age as his own mother when she died, died at last, alone and unmoored in a house of strangers caring for the old and unanchored. Stand watch. Old men enduring assaults on their flesh to repair the rending of time threatening to choke the bowels. Slipping backward, further under the waves, with each incision and intrusion--glasses of water, pills of different colors, oatmeal and soup, laundry to wash away the blood and urine, a cane, a heavy walker, a cane, a slow recovery, if it comes, silver hair a broken halo from hours upon the pillow, bandages on his head

where he slipped and fell and bled. I sit alone and keep watch. Three days ago, a tiny golden bird hit the window above me and broke its neck. I put it in a box to see if it would survive, somehow. Later, I wrapped it in a shroud of paper towels and whispered a small prayer for forgiveness, for the waste, my sorrow. Ask pardon.

My father was sinking below me, fading into the distance, sifting down in the murk at the bottom of the sea. I tucked him in bed and kissed him goodnight. I stood watch. The next day, I maneuvered him somehow back into the hospital. Each morning, I stopped at the hospital cafeteria and cheated the self-serve espresso machine into adding an extra shot to my latte. I tipped the cashier extra because I felt guilty. I drew the curtains around the hospital bed, straightened the blankets, and consulted the nurses. I asked for clean towels and soap, filled the plastic tub with warm water, and swished a washcloth through it. I sat beside the bed and read my book. Gradually, Dad got stronger. Kicking toward the quivering surface, we struggled upward.

Some hours, while I sat with my father, I read from *Home* by Marilynne Robinson. The novel is set in Iowa, in a small town called Gilead. The author's spare language, with lines as lean as an Amish chair, is often difficult for me to grasp. I must read a paragraph several times to take its meaning, sounding out each sentence like a primer. Perhaps it's a difference in vernacular, a syntax of rhythms that is unfamiliar to me, or the gentle piety of Midwestern pastors that is foreign. I'm still working my way through the book.

It is the idea of grace that Robinson returns to like churning psalms. “Assuming a posture of grace,” is a phrase I read and ponder as I sit with my father. I conjure Isadora Duncan draped in a sheer pale gown striking an arabesque. And what is grace? What does it mean to assume a posture of grace?

Recovery was slow, yet steady. In the middle of the month after he was discharged, we celebrated Easter and his 85th birthday together. With a posture of grace, first comes the possibility of forgiveness. And, with forgiveness, then comes the possibility of understanding, Robinson goes on to write. I have come to realize a posture is not a pose, but a raw and persistent readiness, that grace is simply, but not only, a tender embrace of mercy. I return to the idea as I stand in the garden, pondering how we broke the surface in our embrace and found footing again. As I’m pulling up long blades of grass, I notice the grape leaves are unfolding. The new green leaves are edged in rose.