

CAROLE BURNS

*Before Letting Go*



She doesn't know which aspect of the piece makes her want to become part of the space of the room—the midnight safety of the gathered sheet, pulled up at one corner to protect, to comfort, to block the light so white, to be sucked on around saliva-wet fingers, to hide; or the white light of the window, its escape. Or which—she should clarify—which compelled her the more strongly, because “both” was the answer. Oh the push and pull of desire, the give and tug, up and away, of the cloth slipping, sliding from the corners—then stopped. One hard surface against another three corners jerking it tight. Escape. Remain. She can't quite put her finger on the pulse of it—can't quiet the impulse to become a shadow within the linen-cotton blackness, or to slip invisible into the light.

My mother smiled as I took her picture, easy, affectionate, natural, as if she wasn't posing. And then—Oh, you've taken it? I didn't realize—and, of course, the rest were forced, revealing slightly odd smiles and a gaze reversing back on itself, the rest were photographs. The first was my mother, watching me. Eleven months later and I did not know what she was watching, if she was capable of seeing, her eyes wild as my brother asserted his voice to tell her I was there—blacker-than-brown eyes, dulled by—was it the drugs? pain? the stroke itself? Brief, this was, the only blessed thing about it, when the weeks before had stretched out long and supple across the small space of her illness and over us all in curves and valleys and rivulets, filling every moment, giving us time we never elsewhere possessed, except maybe with her as children. After my visit then, she wrote, teasing, of how bossy I'd been while nursing her to recovery (we'd hoped)—the new side of me she'd seen. And now, hours after I'd returned, it was me watching her, holding her hand, singing, no matter whether she could see or hear, softly in the night halfway between dusk and dawn.

It was just an ordinary room. Yet how the light played on its surfaces, as if the light had sponged white onto the walls, watercolored the palest blue-gray for the shadows, which were somehow darkest where the light was brightest. And then the light became its own thing, the light and the shade and the blackness of the surface of the cloth, the hollows of its shapes, the furrows formed with a lifting of an arm, a gathering in the hand, a quick (before all is lost) clutching of fingers—and held.