

SO MUCH LESS YOU



Geoff Young miam 4

SO MUCH LESS YOU

It was the second time thru that part of the country
on our way back to Des Moines, city of your birth
and you got off the train just outside of town
in a colorful skirt you walked down the hill
into the rural picnic wildlife small stream acreage
I saw you, moving steadily away and realized that this was it
so ran after you, you looked back at me and said
it's beautiful, it's OK, lifted your arms slightly
pleased with the air the outdoors the cottonwoods and dust
and buzzing afternoon sense of paths and openness

I caught up and said, You know, dont you!
You're going now, I can see it

We started climbing a rickety wooden staircase up the hillside
you were still agile, though occasionally you'd put a hand
on your painful right side, your liver was all swollen
I hated to see you gasp
but step after step, like at an old mining site, boards loose
we went up and up
and I said, I love you, because you face it head on
you make it all so romantic!

& we're holding hands, I'm helping you, you're strong
but you're weak and it's getting closer
we're getting higher
I thanked you then, I said, Mom, life is so sad
but I feel great about it anyway

There was nothing I could see up there

One morning last fall at the Print Center
maybe it was 10 am and I was making a plate
I heard you speaking to me in my head
and got worried
dropped everything
walked into the little storage closet where we had
the phone then, and dialed you direct

You picked up the phone, I said Mom how do you feel
you said, like shit, I just lay in bed all last week
it was awful, I couldn't eat anything

It made you angry, the inconvenience
You had things to finish, like a coil rug
and letters to answer, books...
So the conversation changed to your reading Laura's
Primagravida
and kidding me about my flirtation
with the greek girl in Paris....you said
men can't help but mess around a little, I guess, and laughed
I swear I never touched her!
And pretty soon we said goodbye,
it was clear things had changed for the worse

A month later I got the phone call
she's bloated in the belly
aged beyond recognition
eyes half closed in bed all day
Crossroads, Bo said, he could feel it, it's 50-50
maybe she'll turn the corner
I said I'll be down tomorrow

Still I wonder who was with you
your dark night, your dark nights
your letting down into it
the knowing you are going to die
Not your mother, your husband, your kids
but you, and the big one come round at last

Afternoon sun thru front bay flowers
the magazines stacked on the table
this is your house
things feel so much your feel
I walk into the bedroom
it all happens so fast

approaching quickly face a skeleton fading of yellow skin
softening out into smooth immaterial substance
I kiss you we hold hands we look at each other

I'm sorry I smell like an onion I had a sandwich on the drive over
The sockets of your eyes are hollow and dark
You have me feel your hard stomach
Your hands are warm, it is quiet
your digital clock is on the nightstand

Dealt a bad card, nothing you could do about it
It made our visits, your visits, so important
given the calendar, the doctor's one to three,
the chemotherapy
that left you exhausted
the fallen hair, the wigs, the hands getting leathery
stiff
And against that
your steady liveliness, get the bathroom wall
all decoupaged with lovely impressionist painting
you and Lafe cut from magazines
and your room, incredible, I hadn't seen it since
its completion, the whole wall behind the headboard
of the bed a brilliant dense composition

You pointed to a few bottles of decoupage glue
you used, and said take them
I don't have time for any more of that

I could feel your resilience
you told Lafe in the bathroom one day
he'd said, baby, you're all I've got
and you turned to him, hugging him, saying, I haven't given up

The body just pooped out, you didn't.
You had no choice.
That was the piss-off.

There were compensations, I guess.
You'd never have to listen to that 85 year old logorrheic
mother of yours again, never cringe inside as she
blathered on and on,

taking her shots at you, she didn't understand
a thing about your interests, your language, your husband.
She preferred to try and make you feel bad
that you had accomplished the transcendence
of every ridiculous Readers Digest midwest cliché
of senior citizens pinochle church group afternoon quiz
program letters from mid-america's moron belt

Your own mother never knew you!
But you never lowered the boom on her

and maybe there were other people in your life
you simply would not have to worry about anymore
that's the way it is, ties get severed as you lie there

And while we assembled at your bedside
the pain was bearable in the faces of your family
the pain was a bother
but our voices, that's what you said
you loved hearing our voices
in the other room

We didn't want to take up too much of your strength talking
but we wanted to come into your room and visit softly
hold your hand by the bed
at night, say I love you
before going off somewhere
I only said it once that week, once to you,
and you heard it, you said, I love you too
Man, it killed me
a few grey strands of hair on the pillow

Up til the last night you walked out to dinner
with one of us helping you
in the bright orange robe and scarf that Bo and Michele
had just bought you
lovely, you looked regal, we all felt the Queen in you
We sometimes just sat there and watched you eat
It was precious, we were in awe
our dying mother puts a bite of food into her mouth and chews
it up.
Have a little glass of vermouth on cracked ice

What shouldn't I say?
You wanted the taboo cut away from death
Not removed with a scalpel, but the eyes, opened
and kept open
No sense hiding from the inevitable

But nothing you took for the swelling stomach cavity
helped
we all wanted the doctor to come to the house
but doctors dont do that anymore
and now your mouth
burned with lesions on the gums and soft tissues
we spooned crushed bits of ice into that mouth
it kept you moist
and you asked me how long the herpes
lasts when I get it in the mouth
I said, there's not much you can do for it
it goes away on its own schedule
though maybe what you have is different
and will be gone tomorrow. I wanted to be optomistic.

When the doctor on the phone said There's nothing
more I can do, Pop asked, You mean nothing? He said, Yes,
I'm sorry.

Pop, you held out an insane hope. You were angry
at the doctor, as if he'd tricked you.
Broken like that ice, into bits, you'd come out

to the kitchen after sitting with her
and tell us how her mind was going way back
to little girl stuff growing up in Des Moines
about the trolley stop by her house, and being met
there by her father after dark.

And then one morning there was more than the usual.
It wouldn't subside. Codeine was useless.
It killed Pop and Nik to see you helpless
and hurting
so that morning he gave you a shot of morphine.
He had the foresight

and common sense to be prepared
knowing the last thing he wanted for you
was unbroken pain,
and so you got a shot of that sweet sickly music.

You had another shot at noon,
and that afternoon, it was early December
warm in the 80s, cloudless skies, but somehow how?
no blue up there, I walked into the room
upon hearing a muffled sound, and bent down

You said, how about helping me to the john
I said, sure babe, we'll do it just right

and now you gotta turn over and get out on this side
of the bed because
the toilet is this way, and you grunted
an assent
I helped you turn over, so slowly,
you were almost gone in terms of musculature
but I lifted you to a sitting position, and swung
your legs softly down to the floor
took a pause
and then asked, you ready to stand up, mom?
uuuhhnn, so I bent over,
put my arms under your arms, and around your back
and steadily lifted you to a standing position
face to face

And about then Nik walked in, and I signalled
with my head to go around
and come meet us in the bathroom
thru the other door, and she understood,
so I got around in back of you mom, and slowly,
your eyes drooping shut, said OK, let's walk straight ahead.

Like a blind person your arms reached out
and then slowly, one foot

lifted forward
I said, good going, now the other
and you slid the other forward

This is the way
we went to the bathroom.
Fortunately it wasn't far. A few steps
later we were there, Nik met us
and together we positioned you in front of the toilet,
pulled up your nightgown, and carefully,
in cramped quarters,
let you down onto the seat.

And you almost giggled, it was the outline of a giggle,
you knew you'd made it, sat there comfortably, we held
your shoulders.

Finally I asked, ready to go back?
You said, I'll just sit here awhile.
OK.

Nik and I looked at each other, and realized how stoned
you were, sweet, content to just be there.

Maybe a minute passed, and I said, hey mom, we better go
back and lie down now, it'll be better for you
and you said no, let me stay here, I like it....

Ahhh.
Finally I said, Time to go back, and you said
do we have to? I said yes, and gently lifted you up
to a standing position.

Later that night Nik called me. The hoarse
raspy Cheyne-Stokes breathing
had set in, 26 to 31 breaths per minute
up from 13 or 14 per minute
that afternoon.
Hard, loud, disturbing.

I held my hand on your brow,
I wanted to return that.
You seemed elsewhere, your body doing this huge job
of breathing, the organs
straining in the last storm
heaving in the outer circle
of the typhoon that was your last five hours.

We were at your edge, peering, as into
a gigantic roaring seashell, rough, moaning,
it wore at us.
Pop came in, crouched by your side, said Go Bethel,
take off baby, it's OK, let go of everything

and like a chorus, Nik and I said End, be done,
move off, clear out, let go Mom

To be free of the meat, the electricity, the distortions.
Your heart
was working its ass off, lungs racing
an insane marathon, the body driving itself
up to some high crag in the mountains

and only when midnight had passed
and it had become Pearl Harbor Day
only then did the rapid breathing slow down, number
falling
from 30 to 25 to 18 per minute, down finally
to average, to 14, as minutes slipped by

and the breathing relaxed,
the epic footage showing on the aural graph
we were witnessing

I alerted Pop as he passed thru the room
that there was a lilting melodic soft quality
to the breathing
and he heard.

And then it was down, down,
the breathing slower, softer,
fewer, smaller, quieter,
still life of a head
becoming less
until the breathing
was nothing but a tiny cluck in the throat
a cluck

In the rush of those last few moments Pop entered
quite shook, kissed you once on the cheek
and got up, turned unsteadily, and walked out
as Lafe and Bev came in and stood and saw.

Mom you looked quiet and soft and lovely.
Your right eye had opened in those few moments
and it was looking straight out
a single tear in it
cupped against the rise of your nose.

A few days later in your journal we read:
"I wonder what music will be playing
when they wheel me out on the gurney."

It was just your family, talking quietly in the kitchen.

Geoff Young

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THIRD CLASS