

For Margene

Shawn P. Bailey

(Margene Morris Knowlton, 1934–2013)

I.

The intensive care unit had never seen such a hostess
 How was the show? *And what did they serve?*
 We brought her primary stew
 A fresh fruit bouquet
 Chicken salad, croissants, and raspberry scones
 She tried to feed every nurse and janitor on the floor
 We plastered the antiseptic walls with sticky great grandchildren
 We should play some cards, we reminisced
 Beset by wires and tubes and a haze of medication,
 She still seemed game
 How much pain do you feel on a scale of one to ten?
 She struggled, mind running away from her mouth,
 Ten she got it out, *ten—*
 Then she changed the subject gracefully
 Is it impolite to dominate a conversation from one's deathbed?
 —she could be trusted on questions of etiquette—
 She remembered my recent promotion
 That's a big deal, she smiled behind the cannula on her lip
 I mean wow!

II.

I don't want congestive heart failure, lung disease, diabetes,
 wounds or infection
 I don't want dementia or even bouts of mild discombobulation
 I don't want incisions or sutures that won't heal this side of the
 resurrection
 I don't want to burn out in a crescendo of emergency intervention
 Fill me not up with translucent bags of sugar water one drip at a
 time
 Stop from my nose the imponderable used-bandage dankness of
 infirmary air

Shut out the interminable beeps and whirl of medical technology
Bring low the color-coded mountains dancing mirthlessly across
the screen
Hide from my face the television mounted on a two-elbowed black
metal arm
Lead me not among the blue pajama people too accustomed to fa-
tality
I don't want to die in a hospital.

III.

You play it again
The Brahms Intermezzo in E flat major Opus 117 No. 1
Years ago she asked you to play it at her funeral
Start practicing, my dear, I can hear her voice
What's your rush? you said
And don't get any ideas
The Brahms is a lullaby
A procession of gentle swells
A horizon incandescent with fading light
And the undercurrent, the dark water, is not a complaint
It does not lament
It is the truth
A story about betrayal *and* forgiveness;
Illness *and* endurance
Suffering *and* grace
You play it again, my love, and
Your sobs fill in the spaces between the notes

IV.

I miss the late-night phone calls
How many slices do you think I can get out of a Marie Callendar's
pie?
The recycled jokes and riddles and inspirational quotes
The self-help books I couldn't return because she inscribed them
so prominently
I miss the abrupt hang ups—no goodbyes—when she deemed calls
complete
I miss catching her bending the rules of games

The disappointed smiles that meant *gentlemen should look the other way*

I miss the drinking fountain in her kitchen

The candy drawer

The decorations; figurines, table-runners, and tapestries for every occasion

I miss her ears and her eyes and her pallet

How was the show? And *what did they serve?*

The pleasure she took in good things done right

I miss how she called everybody *my dear friend*

How she defended underdogs

Her endless supply of *benefits of the doubt*, no matter how tortured or elaborate

I miss the radio, the classical station, keeping her company day and night

I miss her with her family

With my wife, her granddaughter, my love

V.

Life generally doesn't ask permission or apologize

It is and it is good and it does not doubt

It is relentless; insatiable; it wants more life

And the fear of mortality—call it a blessing; a favorable adaptation—grips us

It whispers in our ears:

Things that smell like that are not food

The plunge is thrilling but the ground is hard

Cockroaches are filthy and most snakes bite

It urges us to make love and make peace while we still can

To use up this miracle matter, **a body**, before it expires

And—in the end—

It can make us late to our own parties

We go kicking and scratching, fingernails clinching the veil

Just anything not to pass through

Ancestors sigh, checking their watches, shuffling ethereal feet

They long to say: *it's O.K. to die*

They embrace her at last; there are tears and introductions
Maybe some paperwork; an orientation seminar
Angels sing songs she knows by heart:
Rejoice, the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore!
Lift up your heart! Lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!
And she hardly notices the lightness of her spirit
The feeling of beatitudes taking effect; reversing every mortal
trouble
A daughter come home. A release. A birth!