

Judas

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

Everybody, well or ill . . . imagines a boundary of suffering . . . beyond which, she or he is certain, life will no longer be worth living. . . [A]t various times, I could not possibly do without long walks on the beach or rambles through the woods; use a cane, a brace, a wheelchair; stop teaching; give up driving; let someone else put on and take off my underwear. [But o]ne at a time, with the encouragement of others, I have taken each of these . . . steps. . . . When I reach the wall, I think I'll know.

—Nancy Mairs, *Waist High in the World*

Surviving my mother by twelve years, my father
became my perfect friend,
having evolved from the anxious and overly-protective
father I'd known as a teenager.

I stopped by regularly, alone, both going and coming,
during monthly drives to southern Utah
where I escaped for quiet to write.
I developed a need to sit beside him.

Mostly, he listened
as I handed him my heart, giving it wholly to him.
He handled it carefully like a secret.
He could see inside the singular heart of his second child,
the one most like him—headstrong, quietly confident—
even as I poured out questions, even disagreements,
about the faith that was his life
and second nature.

Occasionally, about a certain grievance, he asked why
I felt the way I did and listened to my explanation,
nodding, yes, he could see that.
He stayed deliberately on my side.

His mind was sound, his body agile, his heart
not only good, but strong. Then at 97
he swallowed Tums until they found the cancer.

Some of my siblings and I were with him
when the specialist told him what to expect, giving him
a few to several months.
He sat quietly
while everyone cheered him on—
he'd be reunited with his wife, our mother. His parents.

He lived alone, stubbornly took care of himself,
sometimes saying he was not ready yet. Life
was still enjoyable.

Very near the end as the two of us sat close—
his vision and hearing nearly gone—
and the distance between us was a whisper,
he confessed he wished he'd been given a choice
for treatment. That day in the specialist's office.

I felt like Judas.