

The Rudeness

Rick Kempa

Late in the evening, I hear her shout, “Now that’s a little rude, you know.”

I look into her room. She is lying on her back, one hand raised above her head, fingers plucking and pruning the air. Her eyes are tightly closed, mouth working.

“Mom, can I settle you in?” I whisper.

She twists her body towards me, eyes still shut, flings out her hand, grasps a handful of my hair, lets go.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m reaching for a word.”

“What word, Mom? Can you tell me?”

She grimaces. “Oh you know...those words...I don’t know.”

Defly, she probes the air, arm bobbing and weaving like a swan’s neck. Sometimes her fingers curl into a loose fist around a space. She holds whatever she has found there, then rotates her wrist outward, unfurls the fist, pushes the platform of her palm skyward, coaxing it to fly, be gone—and resumes her searching.

And I am thinking that I *do* know, Mom. I too have had the best of them torn from my grasp by a whirlwind. I have chased their flitting shadows across the lawn, walked all afternoon, head hung, without them. I have carried their meanings in my pockets, flashed them at strangers—*hey buddy, have you seen...?* I have sat timidly at tables, seven blanks in the Scrabble rack of my brain, and stared into the faces of nameless friends. At night, I open my mouth—leap of faith!—trusting they will dart home, prodigal hummingbirds. Others arrive instead, grackles and starlings, a sorry tribe of stand-ins and has-beens.

“It doesn’t matter,” I console her. “These other words will serve us well, or if we arrive at a place where there are none, the silence will not be so bad.” But I know now, watching the fist of her mind clenching, unclenching around the space that once held words—the very best, the most perfect words—how wrong I am. *This* is the rudeness, this is what’s unacceptable: that at first they were so gracious, so generous with themselves, and are now so spare. ☞