

Visiting the Gardens at DePugh Nursing Center, Winter Park, Florida

by Vivian Shipley



As if I am in a zoo, I peer through
bars of the black iron fence.
Restricted by the coronavirus
to outdoor visits, I'm unable
to touch my sister parked
in her wheelchair by the aide.
Under a trellis, vines seem
to yearn as I do to touch her hair.
Azure blue flowers, centered
in purple, rest near her face,
eyes closed, lips flatlining.
I whisper Mary Oliver's lines,

*I thought the earth remembered me,
she took me back so tenderly,
arranging her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds.*

Someone has smeared on fire engine
red lipstick as if my sister might flirt
again, arm on a jukebox, index finger
running down a man's tie.

Like a live beetle savaged
by fire ants swarming its cranium,
a brain tumor eats from inside out
until Mary Alice, who cannot
escape her executioner, will die.

I know the tumor in her skull is like
an ember, burning until any memory
of me in her lobes has been turned
to white ash. But if I could remove
the top of her head like the surgeon
had done to debulk the tumor, I'd like
to believe I'd find our pool in Kentucky
with us, the three sisters in tank suits.
Mary is floating on her back in yellow.
I sit on the edge in blue daring only
to dangle my feet in the water.
My youngest sister, naturally in red,
dives from the high board.

As a child, Mary Alice was the good girl,
Pointed her toes in ballet class, strung
glass beads on elastic bracelets in Methodist
church camp to help others find salvation:
white, the purity of Mary, red, the blood
Jesus shed, even for me. To give me faith,
she explained good and evil are like sun
and rain. God sends rainbows to make
sense of them together. I'd shoot back,
I didn't need the world to have meaning,
had no ache to be saved or have afterlife.
Now, to be with her again, I do.