

unwavering by Diana Tso

No tremors, no shakes, not everyone who has Parkinson's trembles and shakes, the ones I know have stiff limbs and the stiffening very slowly crescendos, pianissimo.

Declining were parts of her vanishing, like her crooked smile and her gentle brown eyes wakening. Sometimes her one-eye opens wide re-examining the world. Her one eye looks at me, moves up to the clock, moves to the wall with silkscreen paintings of panda bears, a short look at her personal care worker and her eye lingers on me and I'm smiling. Her eyes open less often. When it does it's like a burst of celebration and I wonder what she's thinking as she keeps her eye on me. She also sees me with her eyes closed and I'm so grateful she is here. She hears our chatter and straightens up in her wheelchair, popping open her eye that tells us to keep quiet during her mealtimes and it makes me laugh. After dinner we sit in the living room and I sing excerpts of songs, mostly jazz and lullabies and sometimes "Down the Way Where the Nights are Gay and the Sun Shines Daily on the Mountain Top...", which makes her eye pop open like a pirate admiring the rubies in her treasure chest. Today after breakfast she opened her both her eyes and Baba took her hand in his and they just held hands in the living room...simply holding hands like they used to when they went out for walks. I still see them in my memory: hugging them after every visit and watching them walk from my apartment down the long hallway to the elevator, holding hands, love birds puttering into the distance.

There is the light squeeze of her left hand in mine, which she used to shake like a maraca when I needed comfort and strength. She lost her speech a year ago. We communicate with our hands. Now her holding my hand and mine holding hers has evolved into the gentle tickle of our thumbs kissing; I feel her saying "Yes I'm still here for you; remember you are your mother's daughter." Last Spring she still held the steady strength of her hands on her walker with a slow descent to sit and do leg lifts and rock her heels and toes back and forth with her feet on the floor. I would play classical music and we would do ballet arm sways and more leg lifts as she sat in her big old Lazy Boy chair, with its tatters covered by patches of hearts and a caterpillar. I remember how beautiful it was to watch her hands being washed and her fingers would flicker, flicker like the tiny footsteps of a caterpillar running on a puddle, making bubbles on its path. Her other hand rests stiffly at a stubborn ninety-degree angle on her stomach like a bird with a broken wing.

I wake up hearing the birds every morning and think of Mama. She must miss the birds. She wishes her ashes to be buried at the rosebush in her garden where the birds will visit her everyday but they sold the house ten years ago. She loves birds and flowers. She took care of my finches and bought them a birdbath. She painted cards of my birds and wrote to me about their newborn babies and told me little stories about their bird lives, when I lived away from home. She used to hand paint birds and flowers on sweaters and T-shirts, only some she still wears today. Her last date out was this Winter, to get another MRI scan of her spine at the hospital. We

put on one of her favorites, a red knit top and matching cardigan with blue birds fluttering outside a tree house.

Her sleeping increases as the months go by. Last summer she is mostly confined to her new bed that adjusts and she is most comfortable when sleeping like she is floating on a wave. Today the palliative care team was activated. It was like watching the world through tired cobwebs hanging off the garage door as it opened into the first sunlight after a long winter. But I'm not ready to unlock the door and reopen our world. I wish I had more time to sit and stare at the sunflowers, that I planted in Spring, and watch them slowly grow, moving in a slow motion race towards the sunshine.

My daily visits to care for Mama dart between the feelings of sunshine, seeing her again and holding her hand to the overwhelming feeling of a heat wave on a summer day. When changes of decline happen I feel the weight of the heat outside and then it dissipates into a calm stillness of soft light between the window blinds and I see blue skies and divine cloud formations and return to the comforting lightness and quiet. The quiet of routine knowing there is extra care each day for Mama with specific smiles and specific voices and styles of care and humor not just for her, secretly for me, and sometimes Baba. This regular rhythm like the ticking of the clock, like a constant heart beat and I am here right now with her and him, watching the love of his life fading away breaks my heart. I am held by this infinite space of love that is still and sacred.

I want to stay still and balance on my tiny tectonic piece of this earth and make sure it does not waver or I will find myself falling, falling and will love be there to catch me?