
NON-FICTION | FALL 2014

D/D

By Maureen Hirthler

“My past is everything I failed to be.”

— Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

After you brought her home from the hospital, tucked her into the guest bed and turned on the oxygen, the only magazine you could find was *Sports Illustrated*. So, lying in bed next to your mother, you are reading aloud a story about retired NBA star Charles Barkley while you watch her die. “Every black kid thinks the only way he can be successful is through athletics. That is a terrible thing.” You say *terrible thing* in your best Barkley voice, even though you know your mother wouldn’t get the reference. She never understood your interest in sports; that was one of the ways in which you disappointed her. If your mother had been conscious, she would not have appreciated the irony of hearing Charles Barkley in his own words, but instead would have chosen to note you never really loved her at all.

You count the seconds between agonal breaths and know it won’t be long. Your mother was proud that you were a doctor; if only you had come back to your hometown and been a family practitioner. She listed ambition among your flaws, right after being too smart and not afraid to show it. A lack of humility, she said; over-reaching, thinking too highly of yourself. Never satisfied.

What did you do now? Her typical response to all your failures and disappointments hovers over your head. Some of them certainly were your fault, but not all of them, even though it has taken years for you to intermittently believe that. She was a spotlight aimed directly at you, a continuous interrogation of all your decisions. You couldn’t help but believe that you were responsible for every poor medical outcome, every failed relationship—you weren’t intelligent enough, hadn’t worked hard enough, hadn’t given enough—*what did you do this time?*

You are so uncaring. You love your father more than me. You just want me gone. No, you just couldn’t bear to watch them both suffer as every single bone of her back and chest disintegrated into an osteoporotic dust of pain. There was nothing you could do for her except let her go. The other doctors wanted to put her on a ventilator, but you knew she wouldn’t recover, and if she did, the pain would be unbearable. You were the only child, the daughter, the doctor; the decisions were yours.

It is 30 seconds between breaths now; her pulse is weak and tired. The doctor knows; the daughter goes to get her father. You are on one side, him on the other. The magazine flutters to the floor. You hold her hands; the wait is short. You take out your stethoscope and listen, a full minute by the clock as you have been taught. Your father asks *How will you know?* You smile sadly. *I’m a doctor*, you say, recording the time and witnesses as you pronounce your own mother dead. Only then can you, the daughter, cry.

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