

Trailmaker

Trudy Guinee

for my father

You'd beach the boat at the river entrance
to Snail Shell Cave and wade us
and our straggly friends
through underground streams,
creep us under low-hanging rocks
past slimy boulders, seeping
limestone walls, your lantern blinding
the weak-eyed bats, mushrooming
us into looming shadows.

From inside the cave,
you wanted to find another entrance,
convinced that from some deep chamber
you'd spot a circle of light,
would crawl through to a new landscape—
a grove of gnarled cedar, maybe,
some rocky hillside pasture with watermelon
smell of sweet grass, Holsteins chewing, staring
at you half-sprung from rocky ground.
We never got to it.

Three times now, ignoring
your wishes, our instructions,
your doctor and nurses
have pumped oxygen into your lungs,
filled you with antibiotics.
They insist on dragging you back
when you, 93, struggle
to climb out of your heavy body.

Curled fetus, wilted
mushroom, abandoned shell,
past sight, past hearing,
you're wakened now
only for cleaning,
the timed pabulum feedings.

There should be no impediments:
no shin-bruising boulders, no
pebbles beneath your tender feet.

It hurts to tell you this: *We don't
need you to hang back anymore.*
If only I could borrow the voice
of your father, that stern commander
you were afraid not to obey,

or your mother's gentle encouragement.
Like the time near dark
when you, a bawling toddler
stuck under the porch, kept bumping
your head. She coaxed you,
Come on now. You can do it.
*Don't try to stand. Crawl
toward the light! It's late.*
How can any of us find you,
lost as you are?
Is there still an echo?