Editor’s Note: Grey Held is a Director at Forrester Research, where he provides data insights to major US health insurers. “The impetus for writing this poem was my wife’s fifteen-day hospitalization for this rare form of pneumonia. Writing was a way for me to grapple with the experience, to ground it in a collage of gestures and images.”

Cryptogenic Organizing Pneumonia

I am defeated by an eyelash that holds its position by static to her eyeglasses [Leslie, my wife] and by the little red scabs of polish on her nails. I am defeated as she ties a perfect bow at the waist of her hospital Johnny. I am defeated when she says, Tell me I’ll be OK.

On the third night her fever reaches its apex again. I lie beside her in the bed. We watch the order of news—first war, then weather. We watch a documentary. A grizzly glares at the cameraman from a distance. It takes two slow steps in his direction. Good grizzly, says the cameraman.

Someone comes to scrub out the shower stall, Windex the mirror over the sink, take away the garbage. Someone else wearing a blue mask and purple latex gloves comes to take away the hazmat. Someone calls. No more flowers, Leslie yells into her cell.

We’ve got to get out of this room, I think, so I help my wife into the wheel chair, unhook her oxygen tank, roll her out the door and down the hall, past the day-shift nurses, saying they won’t drink hospital tap water, debating which bottled water’s best.

Leslie says to me: you are my anchor, hold me. Oh, shit, I think, we’re both going to drown. Oh shit, and allow myself five minutes of self-pity, while the woman next door calls out in the darkness. Is anybody there? Calls out through the beeping monitors: Is anybody there?

They bring us breakfast: very quiet scrambled eggs. I walk to the window that overlooks the Charles. Wind is whipping whitecaps. A runner is struggling headstrong into that wind. There’s a gull above him, like a guardian angel, maintaining stasis.

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