

CAREGIVER

—for my mother

by Janet Ruth

For a while she could prop him up
provide appearance of normalcy
like the poles, guy lines, and pegs of a tent
that hold up
an increasingly brittle exterior
protect what is becoming
— emptiness —

answer the repeated question again . . .
. . . repeated question again . . .

calm his agitated insistence that he, long retired
had to go to work

rescue him from a never-ending gyre
of tooth-brushing, hair-combing, and face-washing
in the middle of the night, bring him back to bed

let his angry stubbornness roll off her shoulders

clean him up in the bathroom

watch ballgames on TV—
even though she didn't like sports—until
he no longer understood the rules
what once brought joy—now bewilderment

take him to church, constantly watch
facilitate conversations

catch him when he falls
even when it means they both fall

make things familiar, predictable, soothing
in his increasingly fragmented world

refuse to put him in a nursing home
resist getting home care help

bear up, put on a positive face
be strong, smile
get a little sleep
do it again . . .
. . . *every day*

It was her duty and promise as a wife
she had said the words—
for better, for worse, in sickness and health—
she meant them
she intended to keep the commitment
she could do this

It was only after—
relief and exhaustion beyond grief and loss—
that we really knew what she had done

—published in *Missing Persons: reflections on dementia*;
edited by Deb Coy (Beatlick Press, 2019)