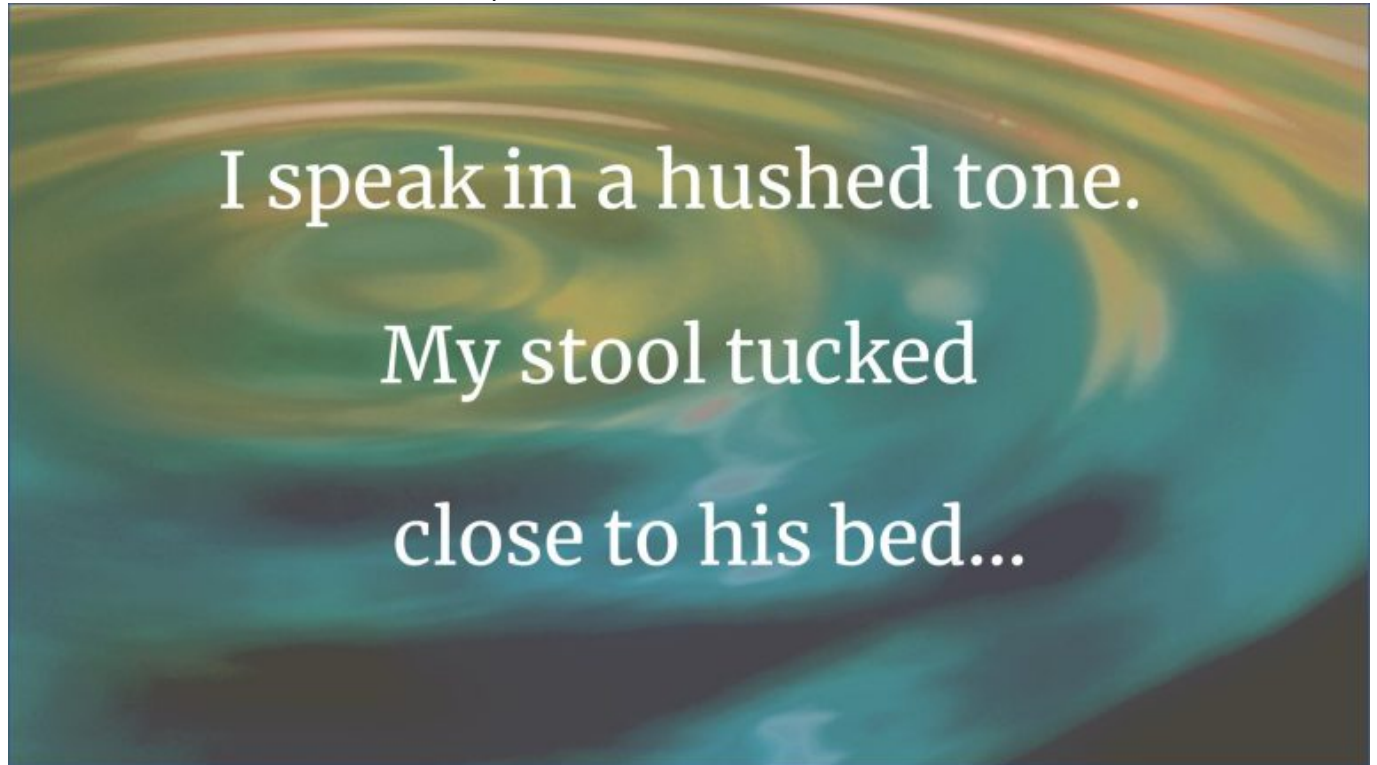


# The Sturgeon

Category: Poems

written by Patricia Massel | May 3, 2024



Kind eyes, and a fragile body like a reed  
Barely just a presence on the room, as if almost fading  
Already into the twilight

Under gentle, careful hands  
His body unveils its story with its familiar tells.  
The slender wrists, childlike, beneath pitted skin.  
Deeply scooped recess above collarbones.  
A subtle, solid wedge of liver,  
Looming ominously below ribcage.

In a dim room, in the empty hours of the morning,  
I speak in a hushed tone.  
My stool tucked close to his bed,  
Hand resting on the worn pommel of his shoulder.

Across the distance, I float a story.  
Like a paper boat set adrift into a moonless night.  
An anticipated slow fade into the gloom.  
His illness, a familiar shadow with every movement.

But even sad tales suffer unforeseen turns.  
Tonight, the CT scan, a sturgeon from the depths,  
Rises to the surface.  
It wrecks the calm mirror of the lake  
And, splashing noisily, topples his vessel.

His expression is distant, but I see  
He is watching the ripples left in the fish's wake.  
How cruel,  
To have made peace with one difficult fate  
And then have it pulled out from underfoot  
Left treading water in the darkness,  
Far from the expected horizon.

I dip my toe into the water, then  
Swim out to where he's floating.  
On his back, his eyes searching limply  
For a star to shine beyond the clouds above.  
"It's cold out here," I venture. After a pause  
He nods,  
Acknowledging the gesture, even as he knows  
Only one of us can return to the shore.

The lights are coming up now;  
Elsewhere in the department, hubbubs grow.  
Monitors beep, carts roll.  
I make arrangements:  
Call a beloved daughter, consults and paperwork.  
Tick orderly boxes, place stickers in neat squares.

Before leaving I stop by one last time;  
Call out softly into the gloom.  
He's fading now.  
The cold kiss of the sturgeon's whiskers  
Lingers on my ankle through the morning.