



12-15-2016

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Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Rochelle (2016) "The Dying Sister," *Westview*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 38.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol32/iss1/38>

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The Dying Sister

by Rochelle Shapiro

You fell in slo-mo like a mimosa petal
caught in a small breeze, sprawling,
nearly soundless, on our parents' speckled linoleum,
your face wan, bluish beneath your blue eyes. I,
five years younger, didn't know
you could make yourself faint. I didn't know you whittled
yourself away spitting your meals into napkins.
I thought you had the "C" like Auntie Becky or Aunt Ceil.
When you slept until 4:00 p.m. and Mother put a mirror
to your parted lips, I never expected breath.
Those "slashes" on your wrists, grazes
that didn't need stitches, healed to pearly stripes.

Black widow spider, you wove us all into your worry-web,
yet you went on to outlive a husband
and three live-in men. How old were you when you fell
in love with death? I remember you
and me leaping from your twin bed to mine,
the bottoms of our nightgowns ballooning, your chestnut hair
flying up from your shoulders. You,
airborne, born of air. We had to grip your arms
to stop you from throwing yourself into Father's open grave.

When a doctor told you to see a therapist, you'd change doctors.
I'd change my phone number, return your letters, unopened.
Before long, Mother would say, "But she's your sister,"
and I'd remember you holding my small hand
to file my nails, buffing them with crème rouge.
I would phone you again, and your silky thread
would begin to spool itself around me.

Hatching your latest death, you bought a mobile home
in a trailer park smack inside a hurricane belt.
I surf weather channels, startle when a car backfires,
as if your house could thunk down into my yard.

Last night I dreamed you were laid out
in a coffin on palest blue satin, your hair
in tendrils on the shiny lace-edged pillow.
I put a mirror to your lips. When I didn't see
vapor, I felt myself take full breaths.