It is about two terminally ill patients I was carrying when I was on internal medicine, who were similar in age, living alone and widowed. To ease my own pain of witnessing their individual loneliness each day as I rounded on them, I wrote this fantasy piece of another world that provided them a different ending; a love story instead. Although at the end of the poem, I am snapped back to the reality of sending them each home to likely pass away alone and the reality that either would ever meet the other, it somehow made me feel better that day to write it. Anyways, thought it was moment in which writing creatively, even fantastically, once again really helped me manage some of the more difficult realities of life and medicine. I had never tried that before, only usually reflective pieces and it was interesting!

‘eight-one’ – by Supreetha Gubbala

“well, I am sure you can tell,”
she pursed primly.
“it isn’t real,”
as we asked
exactly how much blood
was arriving from her
“bottom.”

“about a cup, I believe,”
she calculated,
hands folded neatly
across a tender belly
“your wig
should not be a problem
in the MRI machine,
mrs. sheldon,”
we soothed.

each strand exactly
the same
    progression
of grey.
not unruly
like her aging bowels
as they rudely released deep sighs,
and crimson farts
of exhaustion
within the captivity
of her cavity.

unable to hide
their boredom
with their jester
after a lifetime of
loss, pain
and tylenol

no alcohol.
three kids
then loss,
then pain
and tylenol.

he leaned forward
in 629B,
bones with holes
and a chest so wide,
it flapped as he laughed
as if it were jammed up
with old newspapers
or wisdom.

a translator
for the hospital
he was now dying in
“for fifteen years!”
he reported cheerfully.

she slipped gently into the machine
the plastic wig glistening.
rubbing her
pale knuckles
waiting for a warm hand
to intervene.

mr. chan was not a
beautiful man,
but his neck,
it was slender.
perhaps mrs. sheldon,
weary,
could lay her head
here.

together,
they could retrieve
eight-one
as a year not lost
amidst their
paths to
MRIs
and dysphagia,

but gained
as two deformed bodies
crawled towards
each other,
crossing hospital curtains,
and curfews
to turn 16 once more
before eight-two
could arrive.

Her eyes glistening
as once they did
on the shores of Nahant
in 1975.

She placed her index finger
across his lips,
quieting him
as she placed before him
her esophagus
and a voice
he would soon lose.

His hand shook
along the edges
of her wig,
as he placed
on her bed stand
his bowels
and dignity.

All
that was
now slipping
steadily
between their
marble metacarpals.

Each day,
when his daughter arrived
with a church member
she would wear
a smile
out of proportion
to his exam,
but even
before I could
question her
indignant happiness,
his eyes
asked mine
for understanding
for his only daughter;
who looked like
sunshine
and
did not know.
One day, years later, Mrs. Sheldon would be walking by her usual wig store; coming to a slow for the first time before the blonde bob of her younger form in the window.

Mr. Tran would wrinkle, when he arrived to walk her down to radiation, in all the corners of his now hollowed face.

She looked “Just like Marilyn!” He would exclaim in a thick Asian-English intonation.

Late in the night when the chills woke them, Mrs. Sheldon would whisper in his ears, with perfect pronunciation, the news of the day, and stare at how the moon shone across the warm chest and slender neck.
that was killing him,
and changing her.

They would be
dignified together,
like children
who grew up too fast

folding the newspapers
they had finished;
not tossing them
astray
with exhaustion.

She would comb
the uniform strands
of her grey wig
tenderly
until the very end;
I entertained.

Then I discharged each;
both eight–one.
One to an
empty apartment
the other,
palliative care
across town.

Raising my hand up
in a quiet goodbye,
to watch each
thinning figure
returning
to places,

where they would
never meet.