

Betsy Struthers

## PRETTY LITTLE ANGELS

Hope the elevator will be slow, or out of service,  
but it pings open the second I touch the button.  
At least it's empty. At least, for the slow ascent  
to the fourth floor, there's time to compose  
what to say. How to say it. Nod to the nurse  
who nods back, smiles – or frowns, can't tell,  
don't stop to ask. Don't want to know. Pass tables  
set with plastic cloths, acrylic vases, lurid  
pink carnations. More pretense. Mom's door  
is closed, a new sign, her scrawl on white paper:  
*Knoc befor Enter*. Letters large at the top, shrink,  
drift to the lower corner. Tap. Wait. Tap again. Push  
the door open, peek in: she's still in the bed, sheet  
tucked under chin, quilt bunched at the foot. That  
smell: disinfectant, floor polish, piss. Hesitate  
to enter, to wake her startled and afraid. Or  
not wake her. Too long a pause until she croaks,  
*Is that you?* Ease in, shrug off purse, jacket,  
it's hot in here. Open curtain, let in light, air.  
The floor a spill of photos, crumpled notes.  
She's been moving things again. Losing things.  
Crying on the phone about lost things. What  
has been taken from her. What she misses  
so much, has willfully abandoned. Clinging  
to memory, she has turned her back  
on the pigeons cooing on the sill, the children's  
singsong in the park across the street. Hears  
only sirens – police, fire, the ambulance  
she waits for, that will come for her. *When  
will it come?* She clutches my wrist. *Where  
is your father? Is he really dead and buried?*  
And when I say *Yes, years now*, she begs,  
*Will he wait for me? All this time in heaven  
with the pretty little angels, won't one get  
her hooks in him before I'm let to go there?*

