

Shelly Blankman

Breathe

The darkness of death filled the MRI tunnel
like a grave, the rumble of machinery, a death rattle
I'd heard before, but this time it was different.

I still mourned the death of my mother.
Not even the crackling music through headphones
could stifle thoughts of her battle to breathe

as her struggle to respire became my own.
Tears tickled my cheeks, tortured me as I lay there
trying not to flinch. People said I looked like her.

In her last days, she was but a ghost of herself,
smelly, scraggly hair down to her knees, her brain
picked clean by the vultures of Alzheimer's,

her body worn thin from the fatigue of living.
Not the well-kempt mom I'd known, whose
pleasant smell of Jean Nate now seeped

into my death chamber, filling it with her presence,
quieting the rumble, the static noises, too. Her voice
was youthful and clear. "Let go of your fear," she said,

"and *breathe*."

Shelly Blankman lives in Columbia, Maryland. Her poems have appeared in *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *First Literary Review-East*, *Ekphrastic Review* and other publications. A collection of her poetry entitled *Pumpkinhead* was published as a surprise to her by her sons, Richard and Joshua Blankman.