

First and Last Breath, by Diana Raab

He lies in a bed in some small
New York hospital coughing up globs
of cigarette fragments which had been
drowning his 70-year-old lungs, as my
eldest daughter, eight at the time, leans
over the side rail to offer him tissue
after tissue which she then tosses into
the brown paper bag taped to the side rail,
preventing his tumble onto the hard
linoleum floor. She then massages his hands,
and combs his hair. It was as if she knew what
a dying man needed, her own grandfather,
the way he intuitively knew the day she was born
to hop into his Red Impala and drive the six hours
from New York to Montreal to see—but not
touch—
her face through the thick premature nursery glass,
as she struggled for life with her four-pound self
plugged into a plethora of machines, and oxygen
purifying her lungs, the same air her grandfather
so much craved during his end. It must have been
this breath which had always connected them.