The poem I am going to read is about the death of my husband’s mother. She was a Canadian with roots in the British Isles. She was a well-spoken and well-read woman, but she had an impish side, and a comfort with the unconventional that sometimes surprised us.

Although it is not clear from the poem, she made the decision to stop eating, and my husband and I slept in her hospital room for five days before her death. She was either unconscious or not really making sense for most of the time that we were there. Then, suddenly, she surfaced and seemed quite herself, reminiscing and telling jolly tales of my husband’s childhood. We made the decision to slip out for dinner just before the restaurant next door closed, and we left her quite lucid. When we returned she was “somewhere else” and we never again experienced her being “with us.”

The poem is entitled “A small decision.” I guess it really encompasses two decisions. The first was our decision to eat that evening that later weighed a little on our minds. The second was her decision not to eat and thus to control her own passing, which was perhaps not such a small decision.

A small decision¹

Your eyes are . . . empty.
I’ve come so many miles to see you
But no one’s home.

Your breathing is . . . raspy.
The sounds of the corridor drift by,
Cheerful bustle, sounding far away.

I smooth your brow,
Pale . . . translucent.
The blue veins trace a web of connections.

I sit for hours and hours,
Waiting for sentience,
For a memory to surface.

¹ August 2004.
And then suddenly you’re there,
    Smiling, telling stories
    About when I was young.

    You talk and talk
    As if you hadn’t lost your home,
    As if time wasn’t running out.

    Last call for food.
    I slip out for an hour,
    When I return, no one’s home again.

I relive that decision again and again.
    The last sentence.
    The last chance.