

Outside the Pediatrics Ward

A sign: No Children Allowed

And so, I was left alone
in the waiting room, suddenly distanced;
my mother fading into the shadows
as she swung open the door
to that one and only ward
where row after row
of innocence was cribbed,
where the flesh and bone of my sister
had already been baptized
against the fragile blossoms of longevity.

I could only have imagined
the unidentifiable—tiny faces
as pale as chalk, eyes flitting like the wings
of a moth; skin tinted yellow,
swabbed and pinched
with incandescent tubes
dripping glucose, clear saline solutions,
crystals of salt and minerals.

What was it then that I could not see—
was *not* allowed to see at the age of ten,
sparing of imagination?

Nothing here was as invisible
as the hankering of the faithful,
the tart sweetness of a hoped-for miracle
in remedies that were desperately attempted
but as of now had not been proven.

And yet in that moment
of perception, what was most infinite
even beyond the unimagined—
somewhere in between a flurry of nurses
quietly on the run, and an infant,
fluttering as softly as a moth
in a light gone dark—a mother's heart
breaks down in tears
long after the feeding tubes
have been removed—
disconnecting what no child
could be allowed to see.

What My Mother Wanted to Know

A book laid flat,
left open on the table
where my mother would begin

to grope her way through a forest
of pages, pruned with the smallest of caskets.

I sat with her through photographs,
various descriptions, a list from which
to choose: red oak or maple, black walnut—

depending on hardness—how heavy,
she wanted to know, would it be

to shoulder? And then there was pine,
a softer, lighter wood that could easily expose
the scrapes and scratches of crosses

and stars. There was nothing
in the way of color, no sunset bronze

or cherry, not even a trinity
of Crayola browns, no numbers
and dollar signs—the price, glossed over

and still missing for years, no matter—
having always been by far too much to bear.

The Nursery

One small room, its windows
having smiled brightly with sunshine,
has now darkened into eternity,
into the décor of grief.

There's always a silence
that enters by default. My mother
taking down the canvas of the acorn fairy;
my father collapsing the crib,

leaning it against the wall
as though it had lost its relevance.
Had it been a failure of continuity
or the expectation that the light
could have reshaped what it could not change?

I cried watching him pull down
the mobile of silver fish that hung
like seaweed from the ceiling,
its tension struggling to hold its place,

to not let go. I imagined
a tiny foot randomly kicking the fish,
making them swim in circles
as the earth itself revolves.

But the bone and the flesh
are both too fragile, vanishing
into what we have yet to know—
that eternal gap that transforms us
into what this room will eventually become.

Mother's Sketches

She would take out
her drawing pad, nine by twelve,
spiral-bound,

sit with it propped against the table
on every anniversary of her daughter's birth—

like a ritual, she'd arrange
the sharpened graphite pencils
according to number

as though they were the years
stretched out like arms
awaiting an embrace,

but frozen as in the absence of time—
each pencil stationary

until she would pick one up
and begin to draw: first, a circle
for the head,

then the eyes—
a double Unicode in shadow.
Using the pencil with the softest tip,

she would then press down
two black dots for a nose,

drag across a straight line for lips—
followed on every anniversary
by larger circles

until the sketch personified
what it might have been—
a gradual evolution

that had begun
from infant to child to adolescent—

and then a woman
sketched more intricately in full dress,
but one she had only imagined in her likeness.

In the Name of Sisters

I might have known you,
the one I would have called sister,
the flesh of my flesh in our mother's womb,

copying the genetic code
with its own mutations: the color of your hair,

black as asphalt; your eyes, closed
to suckle the darkness; your body swaddled

in the myth of family origin.
How would I have known you then,
too young to have known you

at your most vulnerable—
in your hospital crib, the IVs hooked
into your veins while doctors in their white coats

fumbled in their usual routine: X-rays
of the intestines, the stomach,

vital organs—a blood test of questions
that opened their books, somewhat conscious

of the forgotten.
How would you have known me,
many years later, in that brief shot of light

between two eternities of darkness,
each one a void? We are made of this flesh,
by the blood that is ours, by the miracle

of an embryo lying in that berth
we had shared in the womb. We are—

in the name of sisters—the light of the spirit
that springs from the heart.