

## **Britnie needs a working permit signed.**

She's a senior, top student in her class  
with scholarship offers from a dozen  
colleges. She thinks she might be pre-law  
or pre-med. Or maybe do social work.

She asks if I remember her brother  
Jason. Of course, where is he now? Prison.

He was stupid. Stabbed a guy in prison.  
And he didn't go to parenting class.  
Ten more years. Can't see his kids. Our brother  
Charles gets out in May. He did a dozen  
for breaking and entering. He did work  
in the prison library. Studied law

and criminal justice. Against the law  
to send books to prisoners. For prison  
you got to buy off amazon—that works,  
they ship 'em direct, sealed boxes, first class  
so you can't plant a gun in a dozen  
volumes of poetry. My big brother

Jake, don't think you know him. He's the brother  
really raised me and my sister Tiff, law  
put him away in '96. Dozen  
years ago. Here's a picture from prison—  
he works out, got his black belt, takes a class  
in Buddhist meditation. Body work

and mindfulness. He'll be able to work  
without losing his temper. My brother  
Jason? He's taking his GED class.

He's smart. If he didn't mess with the law  
he'd be in college instead of prison.

His baby's mama doing a dozen

guys now, his so called friends, dime a dozen,  
got no self-respect. I tell Tiff to work  
hard. Stay clean and straight. Don't be no prison  
bait. See this picture, me and my brothers,  
Christmas, she's the baby, I'm three, no law  
says we can't do right. We're smart. We got class.

(three brothers imprisoned in Sunday suits,  
dozen ruffles on the girls' classic skirts,  
is there a law tells these kids dreams don't work?)

## **Marcus and Mark Need Driver's Physicals.**

Born at 23 weeks gestation. Mark  
was 2 pounds, Marcus was 1 pound 14.  
I wouldn't have thought they'd have a future  
in 1990 or been a party  
to their resuscitation. Now they're six-  
teen, both good students, athletes, leaders; they're  
applying to Ivy League schools. And their  
chances are excellent. They got high marks  
on the SATs, number five and six  
in their classes. No, not your average teens.  
Good dancers, but they don't like to party.  
They say their friends don't plan for the future  
and we worry there won't be a future  
for a lot of them. It's ugly out there.  
Full of drugs and sex, a constant party  
life of quick cash and a quicker fix. Marked  
for jail or worse. Two uncles dead, and six  
cousins shot this year, all still in their teens.

Yeah, crazy out there. Our mom was fourteen  
when she got pregnant with us. Her future  
wrecked, but somehow, well, we came home at six  
months and she got it together, she's there  
like a rock for us. Fierce love. Not a mark  
on us, never hit us, oh sure, parties  
when we were little, she'd still go party,  
park us in a corner, she was fifteen,  
quit school, had to work, couldn't keep her marks  
up. Now? Community. In the future  
she just might follow us to college. There'll  
be less stress on her when we leave home. Six  
teen years she's given up. It took her six  
years to get her GED. That party?  
Well that was special. Our grandmom was there  
and her sisters, and our dad, been fifteen  
years since she'd seen him, he's in our future  
again, not a bad guy, law's got a mark  
or two against him. Their future? Who knows.  
We're named after him. Two Mark Juniors. Six-  
teen years. We never knew. Wedding party?

## **Marty's dead, that's the first thing**

Betty tells me Monday morning. I don't cry  
about death. Haven't for years. Adopted  
a distance from patients. Mustn't seem weak.  
Have to be efficient, cool, to foster  
trust, so I blink a few times, blow the hair  
up off my forehead. Maybe I'll baby  
    myself later, after this next baby's  
    check up—he's full term, vigorous strong cry,  
    seven pounds six ounces, full head of hair,  
    the mother's put him up for adoption,  
    he'll be with a temporary foster  
    mother for at least a couple more weeks—  
that's what Marty did, took them at a week  
or two old, at least two hundred babies  
over twenty years of giving foster  
care, told me she loved them all, said she cried  
at holidays, when they'd get adopted,  
go home with their new families, her hair  
    sparser and sparser these last few weeks, hair  
    coming out in clumps, breath ragged, voice weak,  
    calling Skip, the last one she adopted,  
    to push the stroller with the twin babies  
    she'd taken in last fall, couldn't say no, cried  
    tried to say no, but they needed foster  
mothers, and these were kin, kinship foster  
care, he sister's grands, with her son's red hair.  
Skip dragged her oxygen tank, his quick cries  
agitated. Autistic. Mar's too weak  
to handle him. But he was her baby  
from the day he was born. She adopted  
    him when he was eight. Brought the adoption  
    papers in so we could cross out "foster"  
    and write in her last name. A big baby,  
    Skip's two hundred pounds now. She brushed his hair  
    To calm him. And she sang. It's been three weeks.  
    I knew she'd been on chemo. Knew. I'm crying.  
I'm weak. I'm a big baby. I'm crying.  
Trying to adopt a professional  
stance. Foster distance. But her hair, her hair.

## The Nurses Call Me.

A mother's gone berserk. She's locked herself  
in her room. Pushed her newborn baby out  
into the hall. She's screaming, throwing things  
at the father. If he is the father.

That's the problem. He's not sure. He won't sign  
the birth certificate. Wants a blood test

to prove it's really his. DNA test.

She says she'll give up the baby herself.

Put him up for adoption. She can sign

him over to social service without

any questions asked. So who's the father

if he's not? It's not like there's anything

to prove she cheated on him. No. Nothing

but what his sister says. And she detests

me. The young woman's crying. The 'father's'

let me in. To reason with her myself,

as the baby's doctor. I wait her out

for a moment. She's cursing. Naked. Signs

of cocaine and heroin abuse. Signs

I have to ignore for the moment. Things

to address later. I send the man out.

Tell him to get a cup of coffee. Test

the water a bit. Try to calm myself.

She starts to listen. She says the father's

been raising a kid he thought he'd fathered

six years ago with his 'wife.' When he signed

his 'son' up as dependent to himself

on his veteran's benefits the thing

blew up—the kid's not his—he just found out

cause the government demanded a test

to prove paternity. He'd attested

in family court to being the father.

That wasn't enough. So the truth came out.

The man's back with coffee. He says he'll sign.

He says he loves her. Trusts her. But the thing

is he's been in Iraq nine months himself—

just got out. Honorable discharge. Things

he did over there? He detests himself.

How can he sign up to be a father?

## **Addiction**

Her face twitches, the maimed hand tries to hide  
words from her daughter, how the father died,  
an overdose at Christmas, how she lied--  
said he was just a neighbor, saved some pride:

“I was fourteen when the first baby came.  
He was twenty-seven, he took power  
over me completely, every hour.  
And he beat me. I stayed. I was ashamed.

I was sixteen, pregnant for the third time  
that final time I took the kitchen knife.  
He turned it on me,” she rolls her sleeve, shows

a row of scars, her bent back shows the lines  
where his carved initials claimed her as wife.  
At two their daughter watched. She had to know.