

FOUR HUMOURS

Tales from the Emergency Department

Dispatch said: *six-month old boy, cyanotic, no vitals, firefighters first response, ETA 3 minutes.*

We're used to the patch saying,
90-year-old with shortness of breath, drunk who fell, kid with earache:
the mundane has no stakes.

Adrenaline is a dying child.
We pulled out the equipment
from a drawer specially prepared
for this sad contingency:
Breslow tape, intubation kit,
and we waited, rechecked our gear.
The firefighter came in on time,
his blue uniform the same colour
as the infant, and dropped the baby
gently onto the table. Then he stepped back,
the little backpedals of shock:
death is the ultimate disbelief.

The boy's father, who rode on the fire truck,
was frank in grief: unabashedly sobbing,
a nurse took him away so that he wouldn't see
us with out furious tubes and sober monitors.
It was my job to stick the breathing tube in:
it took all my strength to open the child's mouth,
it was locked, and later, when I checked
a pathology textbook, I learned
that the mouth is the first place for rigor mortis.

We worked for half an hour on this child,
so obviously dead, because the last time we'd
done this was perhaps a year or two ago,
and we were unfamiliar, unsure,
and wanted to do everything,
to overdo. I took the father aside
when the obvious became obvious
and told him that his son had died.
His grief a willow in a windstorm;
his only question, *Why?*
I hate that question.

The rest of that day we did the obvious:
grafting our own lives onto this man's,
imagining our own children blue,
forming our own questions.
One nurse couldn't work; I let her go home.
And who wouldn't think, when asked *why*,
that it's cruel to be given the ability to ask questions,
that it's a solemn ceremony to preside over a death

and a grim one to announce it, a morbid unveiling,
a confirmation, and the only answer I give to *why* is
another question: *Do you want to see your baby?*

As we walked to the pyre he told me he went to bed
at 10 PM and it was odd that his son didn't wake up
for feeding but he thought it was luck,
that he was finally sleeping through the night,
and I thought of little ghosts
who will wake us and wake us
with lips too tight to open,
their hauntings an unanswerable question.

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MIRAMICHI REGIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITY MIRAMICHI, NB

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Miramichi Regional Health Authority

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