

Does She Have a Name?

Poems

George Witte

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Do Not Resuscitate

Machines attend your body's winding down,
pitiless recorders: Blood oxygen
declines, respirations slow and shallow,
pulse a thread your nervous heart unravels.
The protocol's to manage this event,
ensure the hospital is paid what rent
we owe for entering its underground.
The bed, the curtained cubicle surround
our family, soon to be diminished,
these days together marked by tests you failed,
Apgar, hearing, the brain's electric yield.
The unit doctors counsel paperwork
absolving them and us: *It's for the best,
you're young enough to have another one.*
We sign the DNR and get a kit,
brochures of funeral homes and florists,
bottom feeders gluttoning on discards.
You're written off; there's nothing to be done.

We hold your hands and say your ancient name,
once cause for war to regain property,
in our time pedigree of aged aunts.
Your levels pause above the danger zone
as if you hear and turn to follow us—
familiar voices, abandoned whispers—
though where we lead and what we promise you's
ambiguous at best. The monitor
unscrolls its analytic lullaby.
You choose to be what we would not abide.

The Dragon

Your nightguest comes in clotted ripping coughs,
old smoker's emphysema wheeze.

Afraid, I know enough
to carry you outside and ease
stiff lungs with humid evening air, admire
this star or that, pretend we're blessed
as others say we are.

Your life depends on Orapred,
Flovent and Albuterol, medicines
assuaging raw alveoli.

I cradle you against
congestion, lullaby a lie,
slow time to hasten you asleep. You breathe;
chest falls and rises, oxygen
plumps blue lips red. Beneath
my palm your heart: *Again. Again.*

Brightening Glance

The gym's ball-light cast silhouettes,
blue stars that swarmed the stage, then disappeared.
In scarlet caps and snowflake wings
your class lined up, obedient, to sing.
Brain numbed by Phenobarbital
you could not shape stiff mouth and tongue to speech,
struck dumb by seizure's afterburn.
We wondered if you knew why consonants
required such practice, /s/ and /f/
surmised by reading others' lips and hands
but rarely heard, that register
destroyed before you even woke from birth's
abruption, drowned by protocol.

Clutching hands, we imagined your unease.
The song began; you stood alone,
small and stunned, frozen in our hopeful gaze
like some nocturnal animal
surprised by morning light. And then you ran,
stage front and center—electric
sneakers flashing out their coded firefly
language—to gallop a ballet,
eyes searching for us in that darkened crowd,
their glint defiant and alive.
We laughed and wept, now understood: You knew,
you'd thought it through, in secret glee
rehearsed your dance, and in such dancing, sang.

To a Peanut

Misnomered bean of many purposes,
spreadable or whole, Carver's humble muse,

you lurk between ingredients as oil,
a manufacture trace enough to swell

pale lips to crimson plates and supersize
her tongue until she suffocates and dies.

I govern daughters rivalrous as queens,
one deaf from birth, her younger sister keen

with jealousy for unshared attention.
My routine weekend blur of errands runs

a slide show of suburban photo ops,
from dump to dry cleaner to Stop 'n Shop

where, goading me, she chews you by mistake,
collapsing in anaphylactic shock

I can't arrest—her Epi-pen at home,
forgotten there with Benadryl and phone—

nor press a key to pause indifferent time,
excuse the blame or craft an alibi,

release her throat from inflammation's grip
to breathe and shriek, again an infant ripped

into our world. Imagining such harm
I grimace through a smile as she performs,

displaying you as if the universe
between two fingertips, creation hers,

blue eyes aglow with self-important glee:
"Now *I* can have a disability!"