Takotsubo’s Long Shadow

Pam Lenkov

Two grandparents, patients this week
Lost their grandson
A life snuffed
Asphyxiated
His own hands the weapons
“He was the most like me”
Grandfather’s words
Limned by heartbreak
Running hands through gray hair
Curly
As that of the young man
Blond and grinning in his hockey jersey
In the photo
In my hand

A mother, long my patient
Lost her son
University’s first year
More foe-like
Than friend
His life loosed
In that instant
The rope tightened
“When he smiled the world smiled back”
His mother said
Wondering what perhaps hid there
If only she’d known what
His smiles belied
I lean forward
In appreciation
Seeing the broadest smile
Curved lips beaming
In the photo
In my hand

A young woman, newly my patient
Face tear-streaked
Rivulets of mascara its geography
Sister lost
To the aggression of sarcoma
In the handing over
The photo’s image
Transiently suspended
In the space between us
Almost corporeal
Captivating
I see the long dark hair
Dark eyes
A fragment
In my hand

At week’s end
Medical student having been
My shadow
Observing
Listening
(So hope!) learning
Asked
“How do you know what to say...
when you don’t know what to say?”
Here’s the way
(A clinician’s art!)
Stop the tap tap tapping
Deny the insistent screen
Put down the pen
From the history-taking grasp
Whose intent is clear
In the scratch scratch scratching
Putting words to paper

We spend our time
Wrestling
Wrestling narratives
Into obeisance
Poking
Prodding fingers examining
Prescribing
Ordering

That’s not the way
(Here’s the privilege!)
Look them in the eyes
Don’t know what to say?
Don’t say anything
Platitudes are oily useless things

Take the photo in your hand
Engage
Suspend all else sensory
But this respectful seeing
(So much less worthy is the
Feeling the hard chair beneath you
Peering at the soulless screen
Hearing the hum that is the hospital
Astir like some great beast)
Let the image
Be the all
Between you
In the gathering silence
The best treatment
Of wavering hearts
Your mute deference
Saying all
That needs to be said

*A takotsubo is a type of trap used to capture octopus. Its relevance to clinical medicine is in the specific syndrome named for it, Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, whereby the (grief-stricken or stressed) heart balloons out and assumes a similar shape to this trap.

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