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## 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.

**Pam Lenkov** is a poet,  
clinician, and educator in  
the Faculty of Medicine,  
University of Toronto.  
Email: [pamela.lenkov@sunnybrook.ca](mailto:pamela.lenkov@sunnybrook.ca)