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TIME AND FEVERS BURN AWAY INDIVIDUAL BEAUTY

I CAN NEVER QUITE FREE myself from images of sick and dying children: the bacterial infections that claim little bodies so quickly, head-chest-abdominal traumas of toddlers struck by cars in streets—parents who *just looked away for a second.*

I've stood over these bodies as if I were not a doctor, but a parent. Even if for a moment, I've looked on the children as if they must suffer unto me, as if I were their father. When I tell a child's parents what is wrong and what might occur and, in the worst of cases, what is irrevocable, I tell them with solemn dread, but also with release.

Thank god, I say to myself, *my children are alive and well.*

At these moments I am tempted to mention to these parents a few poems they might read, poems that might assuage their fears and help to put their loss or worry into perspective. I never do, because the parents have yet to look at their child and decide what to do next, and poetry presupposes my response or even manner of thinking.

One day my son collapsed and shook for several minutes. I rode with him in the ambulance to the hospital. He was watched carefully and tested carefully and it was determined that he'd had a seizure (but I knew that already), and that it wasn't the result of an awful infection that either kills or maims the brain.

Yet this is not the point of the story. The point is: with my son on the bed, recovering from the seizure, I had time to call my wife. I told her what had happened in a way that is fully different from any sort of medical history I have ever had to convey. I told her that our son was sick, that he was unconscious, that he had just seized, and that I didn't know why.

She asked me, "Is he going to die?"

I said, "I don't know."

Perhaps poetry is not for us at such moments.

I waited until my son opened his eyes, then moved his limbs, then responded to voice, then could stand, then could stagger, then could walk again. We went home, but we came back many more times.

On one of those times I was reading Mendelson's volume of W.H. Auden's *Selected Poems*. My son had just had a thirty-minute seizure and I was worried that he might not wake up again, that he might require tubes for feeding and breathing for the rest of his life. Two years old and so brief a mark, except for the skin-on-skin transaction. I held his arm with one hand and the Auden in my other. I came upon "Lullaby," a poem with which I was familiar, but now read in an entirely different way:

> Lay your sleeping head, my love,
> Human on my faithless arm;
> Time and fevers burn away
> Individual beauty from
> Thoughtful children, and the grave
> Proves the child ephemeral:
> But in my arms till break of day
> Let the living creature lie,
> Mortal, guilty, but to me
> The entirely beautiful.

Nurses at an adjacent desk watched monitors make feeble protests. Behind curtains mourners sat next to beds. Paramedics wheeled in geriatric patients who knew the nurses by name. My wife sat on the other side of the bed and asked me aloud, "Will he ever be able to grow up and love a woman?"

In this place I have worked and in this place I have delivered bad news and now in this place I have read poems I might have recommended to men like myself, men who had always wanted a love that would carry them forward and onward, accepting the risk that loss is intensified with contrast.

I had no quarrel with Auden. In the abstract, he is right. Beauty is part of loss. But only poetry can say this; no father can ever feel it or agree in terms of his own children. I had no problem with Auden's lack of belief, more with his suggestion that the living creature is yet enough to believe in. The living is what we are cheated of, and the dead are what we remember of beauty.

The living creature is enough to believe in, religion be damned, and poetry is enough to believe in, but Auden was never a father and, though mortal too, facing the same sentence that we face, he never outstretched his arm for love, looking on his ephemeral son.

I hated the irresistible beauty of the poem, its summary of the human condition without a specific word about an individual creature, a pressing detail, something to make the poem itself human. "Lullaby" is, at bottom, rhetoric.[1]

Up to then I had written many poems about my own children, poems packed with detail, leavened with general statements about love. In the face of my son's illness I was compelled to change my writing to reflect the change in my life. Because I had to stop working to care for a child who might seize up to fifteen times a day, I needed to alter how I wrote about him, in solidarity. I preserved my memory of less troubled times by continuing to write metred lyrics about our new life, but I also wrote strange biblical exegesis as footnoted prose poems. I wrote transpositions of love poems married with neurological texts. I wrote poem after poem and ran them through improvised filter after filter, complicating the process to the point that I then ran the poems through simplification filters. I built up the poems, I tore them down. I was left with ruins—and with a different sequence, something meant to stand as the intersection between him and me, his language and my language in transfer.

It is anger that I felt then, a terrible anger, that, given with the gift of a child is the proviso that they could die, and that the reason they could die might be your own fault—the fault of family histories, the faults I've written about time and time again: alcohol, mental illness, epilepsy. I cannot escape guilt in my own life, and now he is marked by it too. So many good things we pass on to our children. But we must reckon with the vulnerabilities.

This is one of the opportunities for poets: to look upon their children and realize that those little lives aren't merely opportunities for the expression of poetic wonder or even human love. It is a chance to square themselves with the worst outcome, as poets have done throughout history, and as I did when I looked at my patients' parents in emergency departments in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick and Ontario. But when I read those poems before my son fell ill, it was with the terrible feeling of relief that I had not experienced the same. The grief of Ben Jonson, for example, who is my personal dean of mourning:

> Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
> My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.

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1. "Lullaby" was also not intended to convey parental love, being written by the gay Auden to his fourteen-year-old lover and pupil.

It is a common theme: we poet-fathers relate to hands, and we blame ourselves for what we can't control. When Jonson attributes to his son the distinction of being his "best piece of poetry," I think he was making a plea known to me: that all the writing would be given up, at a stroke, if the child would yet live. The poetry could die instead.

Philip Levine is also someone I had read as a spiritual, if not technical, progenitor. The opening to his "Night Thoughts Over a Sick Child" encapsulates, in a Lowellian prosody, the central dilemma:

> Numb, stiff, broken by no sleep,
> I keep night watch. Looking for
> signs to quiet fear, I creep
> closer to his bed and hear
> his breath come and go, holding
> my own as if my own were
> all I paid. Nothing I bring,
> say, or do has meaning here.

The nights of listening, of waiting to hear the guttural sound of sleep broken by seizure, the wakefulness of being on perpetual guard, and then giving up and just sitting in his room and watching for them, playing elaborate games—if the right kind of watch is kept, there will be no more seizures. But the seizures come and my son holds his breath as they occur and I hold my breath waiting for them to stop and yes, of course, I can do nothing. Later in the poem the idea of prayer is invoked, a secular kind of prayer left hanging as the fact of the unnamed illness of the child is left hanging. Prayer, god, justice, powerlessness: staples of the genre, but still able to be cobbled together for a beautiful expression.

For those who wish to understand what it is to care for a seriously ill child, I recommend the poems of Edwin Muir. Though he wrote less beautifully than Auden, his voice convinces me that, in some way, he has grieved like me. The emotional honesty of Muir's "The Child Dying" transcends Auden's cooler love poem by inhabiting the voice of the child herself.

> Unfriendly friendly universe,
> I pack your stars into my purse,
> And bid you so farewell.
> That I can leave you, quite go out,
> Go out, go out beyond all doubt,
> My father says, is the miracle.

Yes, the miracle as it is given: the miracle of decrepitude, morbidity, mortality. A miracle of poetry that ultimately, after a yowl and bodily assault, even standing as I have stood over hospital and sickroom beds, claims that this shared condition is entirely beautiful. The child of Muir's poem is headed to the slaughter. The reader wants to rip her from the reverie—to carry her off with our hands, our touch. Muir concludes his poem with the dying child asking for the father to hold her hand:

> Hold my hand, oh hold it fast—
> I am changing!—until at last
> My hand in yours no more will change,
> Though yours change on.

Muir's beautiful state is permanent, then, just like Auden's. Death is how we remember the beautiful things that, according to miracle, can never come again, change rolling though the hospitals and nurseries, change impossible to hold off.