

Flashback

Category: Poems

written by Rachel Mallalieu | November 20, 2020



Fifth-grade classmates meet years later in the ER...

I notice the name on the waiting room
tab; it's not a remarkable name,
but one I remember
from elementary school
I remember his heavy brows,
which met in the middle
He had sharp cheekbones and
enraged brown eyes
I can almost hear him crying, the way
he always did when the teacher
grabbed him by the arm and
hauled him out of the classroom
his uniform was always dirty, and his mom
looked like she never combed her hair

But now he's forty-two and waiting to
see me, the doctor
when I enter the cubicle,
I know it's the boy I remember
his cheekbones, sharper now, slice
across his ravaged face, which
no longer looks fierce, just
wistful and worn

I don't tell him who I am,
(that I know who he really is)

I let him show me his ailments,
the weeping wounds and hot red welts
where he'd missed with the needle
he tells me what he needs—to beat it,
this time for real because
thirty years is just too long and
he is tired

I examine him, touching his
wounds with gloved hands,
my hand on his shoulder while I listen
to his heart
it's strange, touching this person
whom I know but never touched

He scared me in fifth grade, he was
intense and disobedient, and I
compliant and smart and not one
to pay attention to boys like him
I didn't touch and didn't talk
to boys like him
but now, I touch
the wounds scattered over
his feet, his legs, his face
I pull my hand back when he winces

Finally, I mention the name of our
our shared teacher
Do you remember me?
he must, for he
bows his head and blushes
and in that moment
we fall into familiar patterns
looking in different directions while
refusing to let our eyes meet again