

In Line at the Hospital Coffee Stand

Category: Poems

written by Tabor Flickinger | June 8, 2012

Tabor Flickinger

At the coffee stand as always getting tea,
so always that the ladies see my weary face
and start the water steaming without words.

I hover there with others waiting think through labs to check
imaging to glance at does he have pneumonia or pulmonary edema
has social work found her a nursing home will his family want a feeding
tube despite his end-stage dementia did I order cytology on that peritoneal
fluid when will I next see the sun it's so

"Oh, did you take care of him before? He's dead."

unnatural

in here fluorescent
now where was I peritoneal fluid hey I wonder who is dead

"Yes, I heard. We all had him at some point.
He was in the hospital every few weeks for his heart and renal
failure. What happened?"

"He didn't want to suffer anymore. Had us turn off his defibrillator.
Stop dialysis. Arrhythmia. Likely hyperkalemia."

I know the man they mean without names.
I took care of him before. He's dead.

His heart pumped ten percent it couldn't keep fluid out
of his lungs and felt like drowning sometimes better after
dialysis but he hated the fistula in the arm that got infected
so sick all the time I guess he couldn't take it anymore
no quality

Tea is ready. Over to the cream and sugar shelf.

of life and it's a relief really for him
and so many who tried to help but the gathering dark
could not be stopped

About the poet:

Tabor Flickinger works as a general internal medicine fellow at Johns Hopkins University and currently lives in Baltimore, Maryland. She is also a poet who believes that the appreciative insight of her clinical work makes her a better writer and that the reflective process of her creative life makes her a better doctor. Her work has previously appeared in [Yale Journal for](#)

[*Humanities in Medicine*](#), *Connections* and [*River Poets Journal*](#).

About the poem:

“I wrote ‘In Line’ in response to an experience that I had in the hospital, overhearing a conversation about the death of a patient whom I had cared for in the past. I was occupied with my routine tasks for the day when this event disrupted my rhythm. I wanted to honor who this patient was as a person and the difficult struggle that his life had been.”

Poetry editors:

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