

The Last Heartbeat

Category: Poems

written by Cortney Davis | May 19, 2017

Cortney Davis

The minutes dragged. *She worked at it*—
sweat pooling in her frown, her lungs

bellowed in and out as if the air were oil.
Her expression never changed.

Beneath the light,
my mother's skin looked violet.

I squeezed her hand,
pressed her fingertips, stroked the branching veins,

but...nothing. And so, good nurse,
I held her wrist between my fingertips and counted

one, two, three. Then the last beat came
just as light travels from a star

even when the star has blinked away.
I half-rose from the bed, a nurse

who'd watched her patient's respirations fail—
dumb, slow lungs, they push and pull.

Sometimes, a friend and I
walk in the local cemetery, the graves old

and vandalized. Does a child in utero
sense the blood's first rush? And does

the final pulse release the soul?
We read the names aloud, and speculate.

About the poet:

Cortney Davis, a nurse practitioner, is the author of *Taking Care of Time*, winner of the Wheelbarrow Poetry Prize (forthcoming from Michigan State University Press), and of [Details of Flesh](#) (Calyx Books) and [Leopold's Maneuvers](#), winner of the Prairie Schooner Poetry Prize (University of Nebraska Press). With Judy Schaefer, she coedited two anthologies of poetry and prose by nurses, [Between the Heartbeats](#) and [Intensive Care](#) (University of Iowa Press). Her nonfiction publications include [When the Nurse Becomes a Patient: A Story in Words and Images](#) and [The Heart's Truth: Essays on the Art of Nursing](#) (Kent State University Press). Cortney's honors include an NEA poetry fellowship, three Connecticut Commission on the Arts poetry grants and

three *American Journal of Nursing* Book of the Year awards.

About the poem:

“As a nurse, I have attended many patients at the moment of death—an honor that can be frightening but more often is a transcendent gift. I had ‘learned’ how to be with dying patients, but until my mother’s death, I’d had no experience with the death of a loved one. Who was I at my mother’s bedside? Who did my father expect me to be, and what did the staff nurses expect? I found myself trying to be both daughter and nurse—one accustomed to death, and yet a novice at this particular dying. I felt the obligation to be strong, but my pain was raw, unprofessional and urgent. I felt both selves, nurse and daughter, struggling. After my mother’s death, when a nurse colleague and I walked at lunchtime in the cemetery near the hospital, we talked about death as we contemplated the headstones. My mother’s death began my education in attending a loved one’s death, a lesson perfected later at my father’s bedside. Still, I have come no closer to understanding death—only to accepting the privilege of standing by, and the necessity of allowing my heart to respond in whatever way it will.”

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer