

POETRY | SPRING 2023

Baptism - Bellevue Hospital 1974

By Carol Scott-Conner

I baptized a newborn baby one night
when I was a medical student. Stillborn,
or perhaps a baby who died

just after birth, I was never sure.
These things were common back then.
I had been told that anyone

could perform the rite of baptism
in an emergency, so I dipped my right
index finger into the spilled blood

and other sacred fluids pooled on the sheets,
and touched the damp, cool head.
I think I hoped that the baby

would start to breathe—it didn't.
I thought the mother was Christian, that it
might ease her grief, just a bit, if she knew.

I'm not very religious—but surely God,
if She exists, would not deny Heaven,
if it exists, to a tiny blameless unbaptized infant.

I should have asked the mother. I was afraid to ask her.
I should have waited. I was afraid to wait.
I should have told the resident. I was afraid to speak,

only to say, softly, just
loud enough for God, if He exists, to hear,

*I baptize thee,
in the name of the Father
and of the Son
and of the Holy Ghost.*

Carol Scott-Conner is professor and chair emeritus of the Department of Surgery at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine. She is the author of numerous textbooks, three monographs on writing and two volumes of short stories. Scott-Conner serves as fiction editor for *The Examined Life: A Literary Journal of the University of Iowa CCOM*. A perennial student, she is completing her MFA at Lenoir-Rhyne University. Her creative writing explores the space between clinician and patient.

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