

ICU

By Rob McClure Smith

I stare at a screen musing on plagiarism and the postmodern epicene's assault on pretexts, the difficult provocations of the conceptual. I ponder how to integrate notions of 'unoriginal genius' (as advanced by the influential critic Marjorie Perloff) and, thinking deep thoughts, am interrupted by my teenage son.

"Is it ever normal to cough up blood?" he inquires, laconically.

"No," I tell him, annoyed. "You probably have an ulcer. This is because you live on goddamn chicken wings. We'll get you a doctor's appointment."

"Make it for two weeks," he says, and leaves, bouncing a basketball meaningfully.

Next day the cough: the day after the Emergency Room. The hospital holds him overnight as a precaution, symptoms of pneumonia. Next morning, he's wheeled to the Intensive Care Unit, another precaution. This is inconvenient: I need to be writing, getting deeply metaphysical about the aesthetics of revisionary violence.

In the ICU I tell my wife a story idea. "Couple visit son in the ICU. Due to stress, man commences flirting with pretty nurse. Due to stress, woman gets furious at him. It's called ICU. Get it?"

"This is fiction?"

The helicopter airlifts him to another hospital in another city, where a grim doctor informs me that the heart has failed. My son is not going to make it through the night.

This I do not accept.

"Thanks for being so frank," I say, with a hint of sarcasm.

"I don't sugarcoat," he tells me.

When the breathing tube is inserted the heart stops dead.

Hearts stop beating. Happens every day. They revive him. Doctors do that. Alarms alarm and here they come running to bring us back to life, like Christ with Lazarus. Now, resurrection is an everyday miracle. He's breathing on a ventilator, but this case looks hopeless.

I have to tell my older son his brother is dying. This is more difficult than I imagine. He cannot believe it. In the chill fluorescent-drenched waiting area we don't know what to say, not believing it together.

"He seemed fine two weeks ago."

"I know it," I say. "Remember the mini-golf game where he missed the short putt and got so pissed he broke the head of his club?"

"That was me."

"Right."

"He was impossible too though."

"He was."

We are using the past tense, and so stop. At the best of times, we find it hard to express emotion before others. This is not the best of times. Tonight voices break to the

rhythm of shaking heads. Everything is too surreal, including the conversations. I shake my head as though to get awake.

“Well, he gave us a lot of weird memories for sure.”

“God, he could be a pain.”

I sleep at the hospital to be awakened at 3.00am by the call from my wife.

“He’s going. You should get over here and say goodbye.”

I don’t go. I say, “Call me if he gets worse. I’ll be there in time.” If I don’t go, he can’t die, magical thinking. “I wasn’t really flirting with the nurse,” I add.

“The hell you weren’t.”

I so was.

I lie for hours staring at the ceiling cracks that spell Hell, waiting for a call that never comes. Next morning, he still breathes. Nurses perform a frenzied dance around his bed, waltzing with such grace between the pumping machines and blinking monitors and bags of fluid suspended. In time they stabilize him enough to fly to a third city where others like them implant the device keeps his heart beating day to day.

All I can do is watch. So I write some version of these words, at that time, I suppose, from the heart. I write that I love these nurses, who look so young and fragile and work twelve-hour shifts in a blur of continual motion, exuding compassion. I love also these doctors, who rip open breastbones reasonably to shove small mechanical objects within chest cavities and stick needles in flesh and pound a body back to life with fists, knives, and cold steel instruments. I *love*.

(I think of academics and their tortured syntax and petty rivalries and use of words like *epicene* and how once, at a dreadful pointless conference, with hundreds of professors checking each other’s badges in elevators and bars, on the lookout for the valuable person, I watched Marjorie Perloff act most ungraciously to an elderly scholar. But I forgive my colleagues: they become old and foolish and never learn and, at heart, I live as one of them).

That night I write how I am happy to be in this small warm room amid the humming machinery, safe and enveloped by good Iowa folks who work hard and love strong and heal well and live without a trace of hipster irony, these who do not sugarcoat.

And this I do not forget. Some three years later, pondering still pointlessly the provocations of the conceptual, I remember that night of love and loss and fear and those who around me so meticulously worked to restore life, those who violently and efficiently resurrected. Staring at a screen again, doing all that I can do, violently revising memories of a writer I no longer recognize and will never be again, I say to those doctors and nurses:

I see you now and you are beautiful.

Rob McClure Smith is John and Elaine Fellowes Distinguished Professor of English at Knox College. His work has appeared in many literary magazines including Chicago Quarterly Review, Gettysburg Review, New Ohio Review and Manchester Review. Queen's Ferry Press published his short fiction collection entitled The Violence in 2015.