

PATRICIA JABBEH WESLEY

After the Memorial

Today, another student died at school. Another boy
at twenty, another sophomore, another woman's only son.

A girl in my class told me the news just before my ten
o'clock class. She said, it was his heart- a bad heart.

Something that was always a part of him, she said.
Something in his heart was always loose—a thin line

somewhere. Where the heart was supposed to tighten
to pump blood from the heart to the brain to the hands

to the feet and belly buttons to the toes and back again
to the heart. Something must have snapped, she said.

Stephanie, a girl almost looking nineteen or twenty
or twenty-one or something. Bloody eyes, red hair, she

stood at my desk in tears, there she stood. Was I the priest
or counselor or something? The delicate lines already

making their way under her eyelids. This was her friend,
her boyfriend, her best friend. He was tall and blond

and smart and funny and walked like he'd bought the campus
and the whole world with just his looks. Someone told me

afterwards, it was heroin overdose and alcohol overdose
and everything overdose. No one called the police.

In a college dorm, where the party can run over the rim
of every glass and the fumes from everything everywhere

in the party room can penetrate every fabric of everything
alive, and everyone is red-eyed because something

else is smelling. And you know it is often too late to call
the police or the ambulance, and of course, not his parents.

He was supposed to come to, they'd said, on the floor where
everybody left him so he could come to. Last year, another

student died—my student—at home, in a bed that belonged
to him, where the sheets and the mattress were soft

and white and cool and personal. The sheets understood
the matter more plainly. They belonged to him. It was drug

overdose, someone said. When the news came on the phone,
I was at home. Tuesday—not a day for news. The Dean from

campus called to break the news to me. Why me, I thought.
I was scared. His Mom had asked to break the news gently

to this one teacher. She will take it hard, and my son loved
her like family, she'd said. I rushed to my bathroom, my

stomach boiling when I heard. All the hours I'd spent
tutoring this one kid until his writing skills which had nothing

to do with his writing skills, sharpened. His words had taken
on color and detail and precision just so he would die?

He had died quietly in his sleep, I was told. At the college
dinner after the memorial, his Mom held my hand tight,

staring. "He was our only child, you know." Silence.

"I understand completely," I said. "I understand incompletely."

Copyright: *The River is Rising* (Patricia Jabbeh Wesley/Autumn House Press,
1997)