

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 2

January 2005

Prayer for the Light Baby

Gail Waldstein

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Recommended Citation

Waldstein, Gail (2005) "Prayer for the Light Baby," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol4/iss2/2>

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WINNER

PRAYER FOR THE LIGHT BABY

Gail Waldstein

My Pilates teacher says *think*
of sleeping babies, how heavy
they feel dead
weight. *Tense those glutes*
pecs, abs, make them work.

I squeeze even eyelids see light
babies from my medical practice
years I did post mortems
bad days up to five.

My breath draws
her instructions in.

The awake baby is light.

I remember mine
writhing squirming seeking
to get down *keep those butts up*, she commands.

The heft of them from the car
late nights how easy in the morning
arms stretched up from the crib.

They weigh less and I believe her as if it's true
scaled, verifiable. All those autopsies

you'd have to pace yourself
because the morgue was hot
or cold, your bent back strained
into dark cavities.

Small torsos flexed:
preemies don't get rigor mortis
muscle mass too small

to stiffen. You need breaks
to keep records straight, the hair: texture
pattern on scalp, eye color, ear
anatomy, skin hydration. You need
time to summarize charts, call clinicians
gather notes *keep going engage every muscle*
they'll hold your body up.

We weighed each organ, took
tissues for chemistry, blood for
chromosomes, cultures.
Gross malformations named: major and minor
preliminary diagnoses scribbled
as if a baby could be cubbyholed.
Lift, she drones.

You and your secretary trade: your notes
the next chart, which you skim. The day thins
the morgue's clean clorox and steel light
flood stainless tables. Another
naked body, too little food, too much coffee
your hands tremble. *Pull in*
with each exhale belly to spine she shouts.
Exertion shakes you
bone saw vibrates tiny vertebral columns.
All too automatic sterility cloaks the room
like an infection.

By day's last post I'm exhausted
my children's dinner
late. It's en-block evisceration the very
word the world *curl tighter, harder.*

Waldstein: Prayer for the Light Baby

Night: refrigerate organs
release body to mortuary.
By morning *you'll be fresh* though
corrosive fixatives will chew
nasal nerves like leprosy
all meals tasting tin even your baby's
powdery bottom tainted
till midweek. Sorrow
seeps through gloves
a firm handshake
grip unyielding

until one Saturday night around eleven
grandparents from Wyoming
want to hold their son's newborn
before embalming, want to touch

baby flesh. In the morgue
you place
fresh cotton batting in the skull
clean white pads in chest and abdomen weeping
blood-soaked originals removed. No baseball
quick stitch in black cord tonight.
Fine catgut, hair wet-combed over scalp seams.
A kimono on the body
limp arms pushed through.

She's inactive
in her pink blanket
and you think how to explain lightness
to these ranchers *why*
she's feathery as down.