

Briefly, the Heart

with apologies and nods to bpNichols The Book of Hours in The Martyrology Book VI

Briefly, the heart forgets to breathe, forgets
ventricles, extremities and the rest and knows
the technician won't meet the eye
of the storm the three have entered
in the ultrasound room. There's no
sound for what happens while there's blood
pounding through headfuls of the worst
thing that could happen. Or has happened
already. Is that why the outer reception uniforms
shrugged, handing back health cards after
looking up and down, making not of
size? Briefly, the heart simply is
what keeps the room from screaming
or crying or making any noise at all, what
keeps the husband so close to the wife, in fact
he's holding her hand while watching
the screen as if he's seen this movie before
albeit with subtitles and a different director, and
knows it ends abruptly. The technician, who
in another time and place probably
laughs and tucks her gray-streaked hair behind
the apprehension she feels
dating since the divorce, could be hoping
for the best, wishing this time
she'd be wrong and not need the doctor
specializing in this kind of bad news
who's been called not for any obvious reason
but policy, the technician said swallowing
her hair loosened from its hinges
and avalanching the room. To recap, we have
two looking at the silent picture and the third
on her back having swallowed a lake she now prays
will engulf her before the next word, engulf
the way amoebas would in cell biology class long ago when
she never paid enough attention and can't help
wondering if that miscarriage of her studies is
why this is happening, why
the heart's no longer talking to her
or her husband or the hospital staff and why
she's thirsty as if in deserted sand and more aware of
vultures and what they do. The heart is
the clock on the wall clicking institutionally and barren

when the doctor arrives and he too cannot
make eye contact. In this script
the actors deliver their lines to the side-
long glance the audience gives or to others like
the woman across in the waiting room chair, before all this
whose arms slid out of her sleeves like charms
not fastened securely to the bracelet
so skinny that drug marks were not
out of the question and yet she was big as a house
filled with at least one child. Briefly, the heart
gets up blighted from the examining
and makes its way to the adjoined washroom, it seems
this hospital thought of everything, you don't ever
have to go back out and face
right away, the technician said after Doctor fled,
Take your time. Your time. You roll it over
like a Lifesaver, the orange one your grandfather
unwrapped you as a kid. Your time
was supposed to be this time, you thought, shaking
head and heart, unable to separate
breaths and sobs, milk and cream, and you think
where is that awful sound coming from, someone
should help her. Green shoes
under the sink in the discreet washroom
needle their way into the heart to stabilize after
having restarted the cycle of in and out
and in and out and pretty soon compassion
is what the wife pulls on
toward whoever owns the green suede shoes and with mindful
enough to leave them where a heart might have
held its breath or stuck its head underwater
too long. It's a long way walking back
where mercifully the film was turned off—
not much to see anyway, the doctor had said
running away. So now the husband is against
the wall, leaning or holding up, it
can't be discerned from this distance
though there's dampness. The heart mulls over
the ways in which yellow means caution and so
must ask what were they thinking when painting
this room and thank god for green which under
the circumstances would mean go on.

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