
POETRY | SPRING 2024

Code OB

By Angela Tang-Tan

For a week, the baby in the bucket followed me
everywhere. I saw him in the hallways of the hospital,
in the cafeteria, in the streaks of gray foamy water
running down the bathroom sink, in the red heat
behind my eyes as I teetered on the edge of sleep.
God help me, I could not stop seeing the baby.

It was like a haunting,
except I had no right to grieve
and this story isn't mine to tell,
but here it is anyway:

16 weeks old, delivered in a courthouse bathroom
by a mother who did not know she was pregnant,
the baby was pink and gelatinous, face and torso
too long for his body after hanging between
his mother's legs. A morass, quivering,
a rope of wet dough in a
sterile specimen bucket:
a mockery of a child.

When the mother asked to see him, to hold him,
we scooped him out of the white bucket a handful
at a time and wrapped him in a colorful towel.
We put a cap on the too-long head and swaddled him
so that his little face might have been sleeping,
except the jaw kept falling open in a scream.
I closed it with a finger and the face crumpled.
His skin was cold as glass. For the first time,
I saw a thing beyond my understanding:
birth and death bound up together in a blanket,
one thing becoming another all at once.

When we handed him to his mother,
his head folded in half, lengthwise,
like a sheet of paper.

The mother began to weep.

The attending said:
“all babies are beautiful,
and this one is no different:
he just wasn’t ready to meet you yet.”

Angela Tang-Tan is a third-year medical student at Keck School of Medicine of USC. She graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 2020 with a dual degree in Neurobiology and Psychology before becoming an ambulance EMT during the COVID-19 pandemic. She plans to pursue a residency in neurosurgery. Another poem by Tang-Tan, “Pediatric Hemicraniectomy,” appears in the Spring 2024 Intima.

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