

Names

I won't forget her name.
I can't tell it to you.
I can't say her age, or
where she's from.
Only that she should have been setting sheets
on a bed in a dorm room,
not naked on an operating room table
or lying on a bedpan.
Her mom's tears should have sparkled with pride,
but they fell from her eyes like sleet,
hard, fast, and sharp against her cheeks.
I should have been smiling,
telling her it was all fine,
telling her it was benign,
sending them home
in time for a celebratory dinner.

There's more than one way to have this conversation,
some definitely more wrong than others,
but there is no right way
to tell a parent
that their daughter won't have another birthday party,
there will be no wedding photos,
no grandchildren,
no stocking for her on the mantle this Christmas.
There is no way to say that they can never hear
their daughter's name
without a stiffness in their lips
and a chill down their spines.

There is no good way
to tell the daughter
she won't ever graduate,
that her bucket list had better be short,
because the handle got caught
on the hem of her dress
and the soul within the bucket
is sloshing out to the beat
of her speeding heart.

I have come here,
the grim reaper's mail carrier
to present her with divorce papers from her dreams.
her hopes have run away somewhere,
and the house just won her future,
even though she never wanted to be dealt in,
she never asked to play this game.

I don't want to say I'm sorry
because that phrase will be said too much
in the coming months and years.

It will stop meaning "my condolences,"
and will instead mean
"I'm glad it wasn't me."

I don't want to say things happen for a reason
because they will hear "she deserved it,"
"you did this to her."
I can't say it is part of a plan
because what good plan includes killing a child
I can't say she's in a better place
because I'm pretty sure this is what Hell is like.
I can't say I'm here for you
because I can't give them my personal phone number.
If I did that every time
I had to have this talk
I'd have the phone stitched into my face.
So what do I say?

I tell them the truth.
I tell them she is dying.
When they ask,
I will tell them she has months.
I will tell them her comfort is our priority now.
I will offer resources, chaplains, and counselors.
I will consult palliative care and hospice.
I will answer their questions,
and I will give them time.
I know it's not my fault,
but the mother's eyes sting with accusation,
the daughter shaking like she saw her own ghost
and I'm just here,
closing a door,
thinking of how final the click sounds
when it shuts.

I take a deep breath,
suddenly aware of how many I've taken,
how many I have left.
I wonder if my estimate is accurate.
I blame the air
for how stale my words tasted.
But that's it, isn't it?
Words are just vapor,
and names are just words,
and we are all just names.

I can't tell you her name,
but I will never forget it.

—Kellie Mitchell