

*Agnus Dei*

By Abigail Perrin

Something about the chilly, anxious silence  
on waking in the middle of the night  
reminds me of you, Father,  
for this restless time used to belong to us.

Neither of us could ever sleep during those crawling cold hours  
because of nightmares.  
You gave me peppermints sometimes or read me a Psalm,  
while my tears soaked your red, ragged bathrobe and my five fingers  
clutched one pulsing blue thumb.  
You swayed me back and forth in the cat-scratched rocking chair  
and murmured to quiet my small convulsing body,  
aware of all my worries,  
though the gnomish specters in my dreams had confounded  
my preschool vocabulary.

I was lulled through my infancy in your arms  
clasping the rainbow-tailed horses and books you bought me for the asking,  
your mischievous, “don’t-tell-your-mother” grin on your face.  
I was your princess, the heiress of your kingdom and of the  
fields of green in your eyes.  
I was by turns your mermaid, your munchkin, your “snugglybear,”  
said by all to resemble you most of all your children.

In both mind and matter,  
I was your reflection.

I was three when your police department collapsed,  
the hidden mountain town impervious to order.  
The gangrenous corpses you had tried  
to rescue and protect clamored back to wound you and scoop  
your nerves out like pumpkin sinew  
as if your badge made you into something hollow,  
as if your gun made you a representative of death,  
as if you were an enemy.

My mother announced that you had  
“posttraumaticstressdisorder,” and more horrifically,  
that you were “sick,”  
because your job had “not been nice” to you.  
(By this, of course, she meant that you had been too late  
to save a strangled boy from dying on a swing set,

that your best friend and partner had been killed in a bar fight,  
 that you had tried to save too many battered women and children  
 that identifying suicides had become too difficult for you,  
 that rape calls at midnight had worn your sanity,  
 and that no one ever seemed to want your help  
 like I did.)

Soon you stopped waking when I cried,  
 and during the day, your cold police badge left red marks  
 on my cheek, its pin digging into your own flesh.

There was your vacant stare and insomnia and explosions  
 and the declarations that surely your 183 IQ merited  
 some eccentricity,  
 and your premature white hairs  
 some less painful explanation.  
 "He's just overworked," my grandma said.

I think I dimly understood  
 why the wrinkles popped beside your eyes  
 like violent earthquakes, and why  
 the shadows overcast your drooping cheeks,  
 why you stopped reading to me and giving me candy,  
 why you stopped being my father.  
 Yet, when you left your mind,  
 I could never seem to find the words to say,  
 "Please do not abandon me. I need you,"  
 knowing only vaguely how you needed me.

I will never understand  
 how you overcame  
 the doom-ridden field of psychiatry,  
 how your "Screw pills. I'm done. I'm living my life," speech  
 wasn't a sign of delirium but of determination,  
 how I would return home on holidays from college and your laugh  
 would be once more too loud,  
 how I would feel the familiar embrace of solid arms  
 and how your breath would again smell  
 of red, ragged peppermints.

Often I forget that I had you to cling to on waking from dreams,  
 the petals of your coarse arms enfolding my quaking center.  
 (How was I to know  
 that your own Father held you in His lap,  
 or that two hours before, you had dreamed the same dream as I had?)

When I wake now in womanhood,  
anxious over some invisible worry,  
I sometimes wish to cry out for you,  
to wait, half-expectant, in the cold stillness  
for you to come sit with me in your bathrobe.

But I do not cry,  
only because now I know you are awake and waiting for me too,  
your breath smelling of red, ragged peppermints.