

Delivery Room
Pauline Rowe

My bones and muscles push down, feral labour,
afraid of certain death held in this pain,
a body drifting from safe harbour

or stuck at certain heights where oxygen
is thin and winnows away like hot sand
or steam that shadows glass in the kitchen:

far from calm and home I sensed a voice
it resonated then faded like light,
became the clockwork music, far ancient toys.

How I saw her without eyes to see,
lids closed with terror at the second stage,
I don't quite know. A kind of purgatory

held us both as I fought for life and she
came to tell of her dying at the age
we share. To say how very much like me

she looked. She looked older than thirty-nine,
and though her eyes were blind she seemed to see,
to comprehend this agony of mine

(the sadness that filled my mind, stultified my heart,
stopped syllables from forming into words,
prevented my humanity in part);

I was a crouching animal giving birth
in the cold moments just before my son
set his solid self upon the earth.

She said: "It's Nanna. Don't be afraid
of all you've thought, imagined, dreamed of me."
She stood beneath a wall-light, half in shade.

"It was my need for peace that caused most pain.
I tried to find our Joan each day I lived
beyond her. My sweet dumpling - dead at ten?"

No mother can accept such death. My own
was terrible because it was too late
to fight for life. Metastases. The bone...

made my youngest motherless at seven.
Like some stupid joke an idiot repeats.
Though TB, not cancer, took Mama to heaven."

Her smile reached up to each sightless eye
as though irony brought some relief.
She touched her back, started with a cry

of hurt much lower, longer than her own
then turned to pull her dress below the wound
which seeped and sparkled. Prompting her to moan,

this open place. She did not show her breast
where it began - a small, hard stone some time
soon after Joan was killed. She couldn't rest

in searching for her. Couldn't bring herself
to see the doctor. Humiliating
to open up her dress. "And I was half-
mad with sobbing, anger. Devastated
I longed to die, then longed to live too late.
My life had sorrows but was not wasted."

She closed her dark, unseeing eyes, and hands
then moved towards me slowly like a note
of music for the hungry heart, a note that binds

all memory, fear, love, experience.
"Please pray. Find saints to intercede for me.
Not clever. Ones with good, plain common sense

who know the torture of the grief-stricken,
the wandering ones like me who search and search.
I cannot find her here where we're still broken -

Pray hard that I may find eternal peace
and yet reach heaven, reach my lovely girl.
Pray hard that God may grant me my release."

Then as the final pain came, she was gone
and headlong crashing into sound and light
my glorious boy arrived, my peaceful son.

Let perpetual light shine upon her...
I could speak. I opened both my eyes, breathed
hard and saw my husband holding in the air

our son, our child, an offering, a holy object