

POETRY | FALL 2020

When Patients Die

By Nancy Smith

The balloon
Plastic moon face
Drifted to the ceiling
By that time, we couldn't reach the string
It stayed there for at least 6 months, a year
Until maintenance could get there with the 30-foot bifold ladder
And grab it away from the high windows that allowed
The ICU to, sometimes, feel like a light filled arena
The balloon floated out of Room 7
In the commotion we didn't notice
The lady died then
I don't remember her name
I don't remember her ailment
I remembered she had lingered and maybe suffered
She couldn't tell us

The mother in Room 4, it was something deep inside her
We couldn't reach
High PEEP, risky ventilation
Inflammation driving her whole system
To the expanding edge of time
Her son was 12, maybe 13
The age I found folded within me
When my body-mind would freeze as her O2 sat would sink to 65
Weeks into it
After we moved her to the dialysis room and
After Laura from social services held the boy's shoulders and
After that, the keening wail filled the arena

Room 11 had so much exposure
We could see it when the father
Lifted the violin to the shelter of his neck
He walked around his daughter's bed
It might have been a sorrow we didn't look for, hidden softly somewhere in her head
He walked and played the sweet crying sounds that violins do
The sounds muffled by the door pulled tight
The fine vibration, still, seeped under the door and
Rose

Nancy Smith is a retired Registered Nurse. Though she moved through the many domains of hospital nursing, most of her work took place in an Intensive Care Unit. Her co-workers noticed that she would place small strips of paper with poems by various authors on her locker from time to time along with the pictures of her family. She is a mother and grandmother. She and her husband live in rural Maryland where she maintains a part-time acupuncture practice.

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