9-14-2012

Pre-Existing Conditions

Debra Marquart
Iowa State University, marquart@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs
Part of the Poetry Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs/186. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Pre-Existing Conditions

Abstract
Three weeks ago, my sister went on her lunch break
and turned right, for home, rather than left, for the clinic,
where she might have been forced to admit to the doctor
that the pain in her left arm was something more than...

Disciplines
Poetry

Comments

This creative writing is available at Iowa State University Digital Repository: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs/186
PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS

I am my sister’s keeper.
—Sister Simone Campbell, addressing the Assembly of the Democratic National Convention, Sept. 5, 2012.

Three weeks ago, my sister went on her lunch break and turned right, for home, rather than left, for the clinic, where she might have been forced to admit to the doctor that the pain in her left arm was something more than the chronic ache in her left shoulder from the ladder fall while cleaning last year. Instead, she went home for soup, which is where my brother found her the next morning, seated at the kitchen counter with her head resting in her arms, as if she’d only fallen asleep, after her boss reported that she hadn’t come to work. She rose each day at 5 A.M to bake muffins and fresh bread, to make the potato salad and rotisserie chickens that stock the coolers and shelves for the convenience of people who don't have time to cook. Too young for Medicare, at 58, she earned an hourly wage that held her above the poverty line, just enough to disqualify her for Medicaid. I see now how she fell between the cracks. Sure, she tempted fate, cooked with too many eggs, too much salt, sugar, butter, and cream. Food was the love she offered the world, and didn’t we gobble up every rich thing she put before us? A politician might know her as the working poor, but to me, she was a sister, and maybe she’s a little like yours. Did she calculate
the cost of the coverage offered her under the new health care act and think, *Four hundred dollars a month.*

*That’s a car payment, that’s forty hours of labor, a full week of wages.* How I wish she’d been forced to buy it.

On that last morning, did she turn right, for home, instead of left, for the clinic, because she knew a trip to the doctor would mean a quadruple by-pass, loss of a job, bankruptcy, and the forced foreclosure of a house almost paid for. ($700 left on the mortgage at the time of her death.) So did she decide to take the pain and risk it, believing she was too tough to die? Well, she wasn’t. To be human is to walk around with pre-existing conditions—always some muscle or valve poised to fail, some cell ready to grow wild.

Never before have I wanted to speak to my president and say, please, hurry up with this. Beat back the people who would oppose affordable coverage for everyone. She was my sister, do you understand? As children, we shared a bathtub, in those years of once-a-week Saturday night ashings. I can still almost feel her soapy back against mine. As teenagers, we shared a bedroom, whispering late into the darkness between our twin beds, until one of us would grow tired and say, "little red school house on the hill," our private code for "shut up now, so that I can get some sleep.”