A Child Neurologist's Lament

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LATE ONE NIGHT IN THE PREMATURE NURSERY

Seven hundred and ninety-five grams
With joy and excitement you came to your mother,
First fruit of her womb,
Quickening her young motherhood.
Born too small and born too soon,
You could not live in the world of your birth.

Had we withdrawn from you when nature did,
Never-to-be-conscious child,
There might have been mystery in your life,
There would have been dignity in your dying.
But we in our blindness never saw,
Those three long months you lived with us,
Your broken lungs, your damaged brain
Intoxicating our technology,
The tiny infant who would never be,
The suffering child whose hope had failed.

Thirteen hours the family waited,
Eleven hours you took to die,
Finally free of the machine that bound you
To a world you could not call your own.
I kept a quiet vigil by your deathbed
As you slowly slipped so far beyond us
To the timeless darkness outside life.
Little baby, in that leaving
Lives the meaning of your life
And the beauty of a peaceful, well-earned death.

THE BOY WHO MUST DIE

Two years past you walked and smiled
While I labeled you with my diagnosis
Of irreversible brain disease.
My efforts useless, it comes to this:
All your years of youth were wasted
As your withered life, shriveled too soon,
Lingers now on the brink of death.

Your parents in their loving grief,
Your doctor in his sad despair,
Join you in this hopeless, stubborn vigil
At your bedside in the ICU,
Asking death to wait a moment
While we watch the child we loved—
Where you are going, there is no return.

What is the point of all of this?
Is this the reason you were born?

Who can understand the death of a child?
Not we, who did all we knew, and failed;
Not your friends, now bereft of you,
Beloved classmate and partner in play.
Least of all the father who conceived your birth,
Rejoiced in your youth, his only son and heir—
Taking for granted his mortal posterity.

Let us enjoy our sons in the days that are given us,
Fill our lives with the pleasures of our friends,
Yield to perverse time no love or joy,
And mourn the person you would have become.

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