

We assemble in the dark

by Matt Harle

We assemble in the dark
in this cold parking lot

We watch our breath hanging in the air
with conflicted gratitude

jumbled,

We struggle to find words
now,

amidst anxiety, sadness, the unknown

We inventory and arrange
so that our tools will not obscure your reality

We light the candle and set the intention

We wheel you into a room
whose sterile efficiency deepens the loss
cross.

And in this river

*I am once again a child,
of two or three,*

*at the beach with my family,
suspended uneasily between sea and shore.*

Hands and water and voices are

then as

*and I feel the confusion
even as the river softens its edges.*

*Laughing, gesturing,
confident of their child's safety,
the voices and hands can't seem to sense
the fear, coiled in the moment.*

But with each ebb,

*I feel the water inching me over a threshold
I don't want to*

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We ask for forgiveness, *Is that what before was?*
from you and from each other, *Alone, struggling to stay upright*
for our fallibility, *as the waves rearrange the sand under my feet?*
for our distraction, and *Voices and hands of loved ones*
missing the point with the best of intentions,
We call you by your name *making alone*
lonelier.
We remove the bag, *Water, too, seemed to want something from me*
the clothes, *that I wasn't ready to*
give,
the vestiges of that other world *pulling me from what I thought I knew,*
what I thought I needed.
We cover you out of respect *Or maybe that's backwards:*
for a modesty you can no longer express *maybe I needed water to be what it was not.*
Maybe the water of water flowed away
We invoke compassion and call for mercy *even as I poured it into my glass.*

We summon strength, all in the service of love. *But in this river,*
sound swallowed and strange,
We feel your vulnerability, *I let go.*
your fragility, *Hungry lungs once brought the world rushing*

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back.

the mirror of our own

But now, lungs still, the water holds me.

We see the indignities of death, yet

Now, the hands and voices hold me.

They flow over me, but I am held.

We call you beautiful, and know it to be true

I am held because I am also water.

As are the voices.

As are the hands.

We feel tenderness in our fingertips,

“A fountain for gardens, a well of living waters,”

and in that touch, feel the flesh of our children,

defined no longer by the glass,

of our lovers, of our parents, of ourselves.

but by the flow.

So as we pour the water, *tehorah hee*

And the flow tells me I am beautiful.

And bear witness to your purity, *tahor hu*

And the flow tells me I am pure.

As we dress you and wrap you and tie the knots

The flow honors what I was, and then,

And raise you up to lay you down,

with compassion,

swaddled like the baby you once were

eases me towards what I will be:

We open our eyes and see you whole

no longer the frightened child,

And in that seeing, we are transformed.

but the waves lapping the shore.

Later, standing again in the cold,

our goodbyes hanging in the air,

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we hold this gift close,

knowing that one day it will be ours to give.