

Admission, Children's Unit

Like the story of St. Lawrence that repelled me
when I heard it in high school, how he taught
his disciples to recognize the smell
of sin, then sent them in pairs through the Roman Empire,
separating good from evil, brother from brother.
Scrap of legend I'd forgotten until, interviewing a woman, I
drew my breath in and smelled
her, catching a scent that was there, then not there.

She said her son set fire to his own room,
she'd found him fanning it with a comic, and what should
she have done? Her red hair
was pulled back in a braid, she tugged at its flames,
and what she'd done, it turns out, was hold her son
so her boyfriend could burn him with cigarettes.
The details didn't, of course, come out at first,
but I sensed them. The boy's refusal to take off his shirt.
His letting me, finally, lift it to his shoulders
and examine the six wounds, raised, ashy, second
or third degree, arranged in a cross.

Silence in the room, and then the mother blaming
the boyfriend, blaming the boy himself.
I kept talking to her in a calm voice, straining
for something I thought I smelled beneath
her cheap perfume, a scent--how can I describe this?--as if
something not physical had begun to rot.

I'd like to say all this happened when I first started
to work as a nurse, before I'd learned not to judge
the parents, but this was last week, the mother was crying,
I thought of handing her a box of tissues, and didn't.

When the Romans crucified Lawrence,
he asked Jesus to forgive him for judging others.
He wept on the cross because he smelled his own sin.

Sullen and wordless, the boy got up, brought his mother
the scented, blue Kleenex from my desk,
pressed his head into her side. Bunching
the bottom of her sweatshirt in both hands,
he anchored himself to her. Glared at me.
It took four of us to pry him from his mother's arms.