A Girl, Her Mother, and Me

1.

Some questions have no answer

emerge from the lips of a child
in a terrified wail:

mummy, what's wrong?
what is happening to me?
why does it hurt so much?

This little girl with a catheter in her bladder
cries out as her body spasms and spasms
calls through her cries and her tears
for explanations no-one can give.

Her mother makes no false promises tells no comforting lies:

just take a deep breath, that’s a girl

and the calmness in her voice repeating the mantra at each cry is like a balm

soothing the child easing her own pain

and the two of them like this ride the storm together.

The girl bites her lip, breathing in breathing out,
trying to let the wave pass without crying,
wanting to listen to The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig, but the wave builds
and builds and there is no crest and it hurts
mummy, it hurts and it hurts too loud for words
and mummy is there again, telling her to breathe.

Some questions coming from the mouth of a child
pierce the skin burrow inwards to the heart of things –
the questions that you have asked yourself
and still ask knowing there is no answer
but wanting one anyway

and so each time the reading is stopped
by a wave of pain and the terror-filled cries of a child
who cannot understand I take to the corridors and pace
noting my agitation the reverberating echo of the girl’s
questions and the alchemy of a mother’s love
transforming distress into calmness.

Ah, that big bad pig knows a trick or two –
he’s not big and bad for nothing: there’s more
to blowing houses down than huffing and puffing –
like a stick or two of gelignite and a long fuse.
But try as we might, we don’t find out
if there is a happy ending to the story: a big wave
this time and mummy there again, telling her to breathe.

As I am leaving mother tells daughter
to thank the man for coming to read
and she crying hard now wrenches herself to stillness
and with the strength she is beginning to discover
says in a calm voice:

thank you for reading the story to me
before turning away
back into her pain
and her crying.

2.
I carry painkillers
up the slopes of Mt. Kinibalu
to dull
the edges of broken glass
if they should grind together
afraid and wondering
at my foolishness.
I carry the memory
of a younger body
as I ascend
step by step
through laboured breathing
through protesting muscles
past the rainforest
past the flowering orchids
the water-filled nepenthes
past my youth
breathing deeply
the thinning air.
I carry my love
for the woman walking ahead of me.
I carry the sky
on my shoulders
clouds and rain
the steepness unfolding
horizons stretching inside and out.
My legs are heavy
but I am light.
I carry joy
like a prancing child
hauling myself up the rock-face
hand over hand along the ropes
in the dark
at 3 a.m.
toward a dawn summit.

David Adès, ‘A girl, her mother, and me’.
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I carry the voices
of a girl and her mother
all the way
up the slopes of Mt. Kinibalu
and each time I falter
they hitch me to them and lift
and I climb
whispering
thank you
thank you.

David Adès