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short prose and long poems



NOVOCAINE

HELEN HOOPER

After he withdraws the needle my dentist says "Let it marinate a while." He steps on a peddle back there somewhere, saying "Let me crank you up." Then he leaves.

I know how to amuse myself. For one, there's the window. The frame is brushed metal, aluminum, or aluminum colored. Inside the frame: the building across the street and the grid formed by its own windows. It's one of the dorms. I figure this out. On the fourth, fifth, floor, a woman brushes her teeth. I don't actually see her. All I actually see is the telling motion of her elbow as it jabs in and out of the light. Now she brushes her hair, long loving strokes that begin in darkness and end near the window. Above the dorm hangs generic sky, curdled with clouds.

The neighborhood is pocked with such buildings taken over by the university where I teach when I need money for porcelain crowns and such.

For another, there's the Mozart on the headphones the nurse provided. ("Would you like any distraction therapy?") Above the dorm a helicopter nods, rotates, tilts. Somewhere there must be a big X so it can land. A dignitary; an emergency. My lips, top and bottom, now thick and useless and numb. Good. Numbness was the goal.

My former husband claimed that I read to numb myself. Now I am middle aged, lumpen, solitary. Adjunct. This, the dentist's latexed fingers jammed now in my mouth, this medically required penetration, this is as intimate as it gets these days. He has lowered me to the

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horizontal position. "Wider, please." He wears protective goggles. I open my jaws as far as possible and he applies the drill. The spray of water and the molar dust tickle the back of my throat. I want to cough but know not to.

Above, the acoustic tiled ceiling and the mobile that hangs from it, a flock of cartoon cars slowly rotating. I feel for the button and turn up the volume on this Mozart concerto, listen to notes advance, recede, layers, composition, thin tissues of compassion and doubt. Suspense mitigated by reassurance. It is smugly universal. I must tolerate this fine spray of debris in my throat.

"You're doing great," says the dentist, withdrawing briefly. Now I cough, hacking. "Open wide." He starts again. I'm embarrassed about my tongue, thick and awkward back where he has to contend with it. A manatee. A special needs student.

"Almost done," he says.

You don't want to be immobilized like this, drooling and thinking. I know that. You want action, acts. Like the play last night, the actors crossing the stage, back and forth, gesturing, hitting their marks and projecting their lines out into packed darkness, where my ankles were swelling into their support hose.

I feel almost no pain. But it has been a strain, keeping my mouth wide open all this time, dying to spit.