

## **Admission, Children's Unit**

by Theodore Deppe

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.

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