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## In the Waiting Room at Providence Hospital

John Ruff

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## In the Waiting Room at Providence Hospital

The smiling white-haired woman at the desk asks would I take cream with my coffee. She says she'll be there for whatever we need, and I want to believe her. Like I want to believe in the phrase, "routine operation," it's like the lifesaver my mind sucks on as I read my magazine, as my wife works on her knitting, as our baby tries to pull herself up on the coffee table.

I can't get out of my mind the globe-like model of the eye the surgeon showed us, how he pointed with his sharpened pencil to the muscles he'd detach on either side, how he likened the whole procedure to a wheel alignment, as if our three-year-old daughter were the front end of an automobile, though he meant no harm, and the analogy gave me some comfort.

Still, I can't get over how unfair it seems, that one gene misfiring, those muscles forming so unevenly, even the term "lazy eye,"—it's so unkind. Why not say our daughter's right eye has a mind of its own, that it trusts the left eye to be on the lookout while it peers inward like the more precocious, the more introverted twin. I think these things when I'm supposed to be watching the baby—she falls, of course, cuts her lip and cries.

I can't stop looking at the wallpaper, a Dutch or Flemish winter scene from floor to ceiling. The ashen sky, the curdled snow, the bloodshot sun impaled in a tree, they cast a mood I'm sure I've felt before.

The huts and hovels at day's end darkening,  
the peasants so tiny under their bundles,  
it all seems so familiar. The closer I look  
the more this village composes itself  
into a painting by Breugel, that man bleeding  
a hog could be his signature, or that boy  
who's going skating, who runs so fast I see  
the painted slush fly from his heel.  
But what's it about, I wonder—that wreath  
on the wall, those sticks making the shadow  
of a cross in the snow—clues, of course,  
for some sacred mystery that's sunk beneath  
the surface like a wick. And what is that man  
writing in a book? The line of people goes  
clear across the wall and behind the sofa.  
Something provokes me to pull it back,  
I ask the lady if she minds, and she says,  
smiling broadly, "Be my guest."

I pull back the sofa and the lady exclaims,  
"Well, look who's here." It's Mary and Joseph  
at the end of the line—her sky-blue cloak, his cross-  
cut saw give them away, and the small weary beast  
that bears her and the unborn, unannounced infant  
she carries like contraband. So this must be  
Bethlehem, who would have known?  
The painter, of course, up to his old tricks,  
maybe also the custodian who vacuums here  
when the schedule of operations is over  
and everyone's gone. I imagine him  
carefully covering them up when he finishes.  
And I wonder who was the angel  
from the hospital administrator's office  
who picked this paper out of a catalog—  
how else could you explain how perfectly  
it fits in a waiting room of a hospital  
called "Providence."