

Elizabeth Alexander

## CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, 1954

1 Incubated (April 13)

hand comes

goes

baby breathing

barely

eat

can't

cry

can't

hand comes

talks

*Jason? Mason?*

*Grayson*

Mom

## 2 Older Sister

Mother stays with the baby. Daddy comes and goes.

Mrs. Kavanaugh stays with me. Grandmama is coming from Atlanta.

I try to mind Mrs. Kavanaugh.

I am scared.

I make up a prayer. *Please let the baby live please let the baby live*, just those words. First you whisper it, then you say it out loud, then you sing it to the tune of “Peter’s Theme” from *Peter and the Wolf*.

Mrs. Kavanaugh shushes me. “Lofton! For the love of God, show some respect.”

I do not love God.

3 Nurse Wilkerson (April 15)

breathe little boy

*please?* little boy

*no?* little boy

aide to room 7

NOW

alright then, little boy,

have it your way

say *bye-bye, mama*

*bye-bye, daddy*

DAMMIT.

4 Melissa Reese Jennings

we have, perhaps, two minutes

*Mother loves you.*

5 Through The Breach

no lines, no tubes

*not light not dark, not day not night*

breathing stops

veil frays

*Grayson slips through the breach.*

## 6 Grandmama

Ordinarily, at the uncongenial hour of 6:00 a.m., I would ignore the phone, turn over, and doze until 9:00, when Jack LaLanne comes on, but today, what with Melissa expecting, I take the call.

*“Mrs. B.”—*

My dear sweet son-in-law, Nolan, has tears in his voice.

*—That’s right, seven weeks early.*

*—Boy.*

*—36 hours.”*

Good Lord in heaven.

## 7 The Other Door

Daddy supervises my bath, pats me dry, and holds out the ruffled lavender nightgown Grandmama made. If Mother were putting me to bed, she would make me go right to sleep, but Daddy says we can read for 15 minutes.

We sit together in the rocking chair, and I explain about Mary Poppins. “In the white book, she stays with Jane and Michael until the wind changes. In the red book, she stays until the chain on her locket breaks.”

“She sounds . . . unusual.”

“*Very* unusual—and one heck of a lot more interesting than Mrs. Kavanaugh, I can tell you that.”

A smile peeks from his eyes.

“In this blue book, Mary Poppins stays until the door opens.”

“What? Doors open all the time.”

“The *other* door.”

We look at the picture. Outside the nursery window is a perfect reflection of the nursery, and in that reflection is Mary Poppins, and she is opening the *other* door.

A tear falls on my cheek. Daddy is so *so* sad because my baby brother, Grayson William Jennings, died.

“What’s on the other side of the other door?”

I read aloud. “*Nothing but field on field of sky and the dark spreading night.*”

I don’t completely understand, and Daddy doesn’t at all understand.

Grandmama might.

8 The Other Side

*beyond the baby body that was mine*

*past field on field of sky,*

*dark spreading night*

*past “in the beginning . . .*

*light”*

*past time,*

*past BANG!*

*see “Grayson,”*

*napping.*