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Nancy J. Nordenson

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ONTOLOGY

Nancy J. Nordenson

Two palms, his and mine, pressed flat against the cool stone, newly tidied, a box buried below. I wonder now and always about this child who was never a child, but who may already see what no eye imagines, acquiring that full knowledge of what's really going on here in one fell swoop without having to so much as scrape a knee in search of it. Between visits, the ground encroaches. My husband scrapes the stone with a plastic card from a roadside assistance service pulled from the car's glove compartment, sliding it into the engraved lettering to free her name and epitaph, free the rosebud I had drawn once as instruction on gridded paper alongside "A time to mourn, a time to dance." My hand, its underside blackening, moves across the granite, pulling grass and sweeping dirt. We did the same at our last visit, and the one before that, and before and before and before. On snow we stood at this plot an age ago and placed grief next to hope in the company of pastor, family, and friends. Be still my soul sung in harmony. Pink flowers arrived and my milk came in and tears. Tears. For the price of a prom dress we bought that piece of land under weeping willows and old oaks. Smack in the middle of a brilliantly bright winter day the sales rep with his map led us through knee-deep snow. Two brothers waited. Why do people rush around so, I thought while looking out the car window at shoppers on the sidewalk as we drove home from the hospital with nothing but a bag of groceries in the back seat. When it was finished and I had left the room, I saw the green leaf cupping a drop of rain, a picture stuck on the door frame, a secret code for the maternity floor staff: Don't ask to see a baby. Her head, hairless. On her forehead ordained fingers dipped in a vial of water drew a cross. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, outside of time, inside of grace, I baptize you. The bundle stilled the world. Perfectly formed and wrapped in a blanket the nurse placed her in my arms. She had slid out, finally, not making a fuss and that was

that. My husband told me, You're pushing her into God's arms. Where was the strength? The contractions fierce, fueled by the pitocin's drip, drip, drip. The body entombed on the ultrasound screen, bobbing not moving, like a waterlogged mango, had confirmed the worst, and so we began. The way there was too fast. Kick, baby, kick! The exit is up ahead, and I can turn around, go home. I'd laugh later, that nervous laugh of danger evaded, but in the doctor's office it was hard to swallow. Telephoning my husband and sister to tell them where I must go, I nearly wept at the comfort of a hand laid on my shoulder, but when I turned no one was there. I held death but didn't know it. They did. So awkward they were at the silence in my belly. I lay on the table, cool crackly paper over black vinyl, and stared at the ceiling. These babies can get themselves in the strangest positions, they said, trying to smile. Slide the probe on its jelly lake farther to the right, no farther, now back, to the left, now up, and all will be well. How cheery, the midwife said when I arrived for the routine check. My new pink- and green-striped shirt was stretchy enough to last the months ahead. We were halfway. Not long before, an ultrasound showed in undeniable black and white everything anyone dares hope for: ten fingers and toes, lengths and circumferences in correct ratios, all organs present, a thumb being sucked. A heart beating. When exactly did it stop? I pulled a glass from sudsy water; I swept hair from my forehead; I blinked. Which of these moments was it, and why didn't it make itself known like a midnight strike at a century's turn? Of all the things to someday know, when blindness becomes sight and the last tear is wiped, I'll ask this first. My belly measured bigger than the month before, and the month before that, and a lifetime before, when my stomach was flat and smooth. His hand slid across my skin. Our lips touched.