

New Nonfiction from Fabrizia Faustinella: “Infinitesimal Possibilities”



You are in the stairwell, standing with a few of your fellow medical students, waiting for that door in the basement to be unlocked. The smell of formalin and paraffin emerge from the hallway below, penetrating your nostrils. You take shallow breaths, which adds to your slight anxiety. Your heart rate rises just enough for you to be aware of it and makes you uncomfortable. Your stomach growls. It must be hunger. You decide to eat that fruit bar which you’ve been keeping, just in case, in your white coat’s right-side pocket. The fruit bar is filled with blueberry jam. Maybe not a good choice considering what’s waiting for you, but you could not have known. The sweet, artificially flavored concoction melts in your mouth combined with the acrid taste of the preserving chemicals which impregnate the air. Your mouth fills with saliva. You feel somewhat nauseous. You hear the footsteps of the anatomic pathology assistant, the dull thumping sound of his prosthetic leg on the hard floor, unmistakable, accompanied by the jingling of a large ring of keys. He opens the door. The students, alerted by the noise, start walking downstairs with a mix of apprehension and excitement. Someone bumps against your shoulder, and a piece of that fruit bar you’re still nibbling on falls. You pick it up with a Kleenex, the blue jam smearing on the step. You notice the purple undertone of the stain on paper. Your jaw clenches.

Everybody enters the large, windowless, high-ceiling basement room, artificially lit with tubular neon lights. Several metal tables are lined up, each with a white sheet on top. Instruments of dissection and sewing material are neatly

placed on movable carts: saws, scalpels, forceps, scissors, knives, bone cutters, needles, thread. Against the walls, to the right and to the left, two large wooden cabinets hold many jars of human body parts.

The students are divided in small groups. You are the only one assigned to go to a certain examining table. You notice that under the white sheet on that table, there isn't much. Usually, you can make out the shape of the corpse, thin, large, tall, short. Occasionally, a hand may stick out, and you are able to guess if that's a woman or a man, young or old. This particular heap seems too small to be of any significance. Is this a joke, a prank? Did the assistant place a tiny pillow under the white sheet just to break the tension, for a change, to make you laugh? Then the sheet is removed.

This is not a joke; this is not a prank; this is not insignificant. This is a corpse. The corpse of a baby. You see a beautiful baby boy lying on the cold steel table, naked, belly up, limbs spread, limp. You are told that it is a newborn. You think you have never seen a newborn that beautiful. A plump little body, with a round little belly. A head full of dark, glistening hair. His eyelids closed and hiding underneath are big, almond-shaped eyes. Thick eyelashes. Peaceful lips. A face so serene and healthy looking, you would have thought he was just sleeping, *un amorino dormiente*, if it wasn't for the strange bluish skin discoloration and the purple bruises on his scalp and on his puffy cheeks. You feel the sour taste of the fruit bar in the back of your throat.

What happened to him?

This is what happened: he was found in a dumpster a few hours earlier, wrapped in a blue blanket after his teenage mom, who had managed to conceal the pregnancy all the way to term, suffocated him with a pillow. The teenage mom apparently gave birth to this baby all alone, by herself. You don't know

anything about the life of that young woman or the circumstances of that conception. You are left to speculate all the different case scenarios, but then you realize that it all comes down to two possibilities: young, consensual love or the other option. Either way, a tragic unfolding of events ensued, leading to the suppression of a newborn life and the derailling of the mother's. So many promises, so much potential, all shattered.

It didn't have to end like that.

You wondered what would happen to the girl. Maybe she would be sent to a correctional facility for minors, a reformatory, to be *re-formed*. A word with Latin root, like in *re-shaped*, *formed again*, *changed*. You pray for her to stay sane and keep it together during the process of *re-formation*. You wonder what will happen to the *amorino dormiente*. Who will claim his little body? Will he wake up in heaven? You cringe at the idea that there might not be such a thing.

The autopsy room still haunts your dreams. At night, in your mind, you often walk down those steps with a sense of dread. You get lost in the dark basement hallway, lights flickering, nobody around, the footsteps of the assistant echoing in the distance. He never hears you calling out to him, asking him to wait for you. You don't hear your voice either. It swells up in your chest, but you can't push it out. You want to leave, but you open the wrong door. Inside, you see dreadful, unspeakable things: maimed bodies, severed heads, chopped limbs, putrefying corpses. You wake up in a sweat, and you are so relieved that it was just a dream.

But was it just a dream? After all, the forensic pathologist took you with him on rounds to teach you how to recognize firsthand the signs of strangulation; a bullet entry wound from an exit wound; a blunt blow to the head; the differences

between asphyxiation and a natural death; the various stages of decomposition. The more you think about it, the more you remember, the more you can see those bodies, although, somehow, the faces are often blurred. Victims of violent crimes, their lives abruptly ended. All possibilities disintegrated.

Then you start thinking about the others. Those who died of incurable diseases or curable diseases that went untreated. You remember that young woman, with pink nail polish and masculine features, which got you perplexed. She died of an arrhenoblastoma, a rare type of ovarian cancer in which the tumor cells secrete male sex hormones, causing virilization, the appearance in females of male physical characteristics. She had the only case of arrhenoblastoma you have ever seen throughout your clinical career. You think that it could have been you on that metal table and how unfair it was that she had to die so prematurely and so painfully. You think how terrible it must have been for her to fight the puzzling changes with the pink nail polish and the eye shadow and feminine clothes. You also think how horrible it is that those very organs destined for reproduction, for the survival of the species, can kill you in so many different and ugly ways. Mother Nature betrays you, punishes you, keeps you under her thumb. And yet you still have to show her, if not love, respect. Your rebellions are futile. She has no mercy.

Some of those you saw on the tables died of self-suppression to keep life from happening to them, to stop the thinking and the feeling.

You'll never forget that middle-aged man who jumped off a building, with a problem list that went like this: "anxiety disorder, unspecified; housing problems; economic problems; occupational problems; other unspecified problems related to psychosocial circumstances; problems related to social environment; unavailability and inaccessibility of health-care facilities; post-traumatic stress disorder." You wondered what

was the trauma that sent his life spiraling down. Were his parents still alive? Did they witness the demise of their own child? Did they cause it? How many times did they hope things would get better? Did anybody try to help him?

Then again, that twenty-three-year-old girl who died of an overdose, not accidental, whose medical record documented she was a “victim of sexual assault *when young*, marijuana smoker, Chlamydia infection, Gonorrhea infection, Syphilis, major depressive disorder, recurrent, severe, with psychotic features, schizoaffective disorder, foster care when young, problems related to primary support group, legal problems, poverty, homelessness, P3G3A0” (*three pregnancies, three births, no abortions*). You asked yourself what happened to her children, and you thought that the same cycle of destruction must have already been ignited.

Then there are those you didn't see but you heard of. There was that seventeen-year-old boy who hid himself in a cargo container on a ship sailing from a port in North Africa, looking for a better life somewhere in Europe. He was found dead, dehydrated, asphyxiated, when the container was finally opened upon arrival to its destination. Would his loved ones ever learn what happened to him? Would they at least get his body back? You wondered whom and what life he had left behind. You wondered what he was running away from. You wondered how he must have felt when the air started to run out, when the container got too hot, when the water was down to the last drop. Did he ever give up the hope of surviving? Could that have been you in that predicament? You found yourself holding your breath.

Infinitesimal vs. infinite.

Incalculably, exceedingly, or immeasurably minute; vanishingly

small vs. limitless or endless in space, extent, or size; impossible to measure or calculate, countlessly great; immense.

Infinitesimal, like a number that is closer to zero than any standard real number. Infinite, like the infinite mercy of God.

The Infinite-Infinitesimal is the difference between those who are mainstream and those who are at the margins, those for whom the sky is the limit and those who have no sky, those with lives full of promise and those with no promise at all. All ripped away from them sometimes right at the beginning, sometimes early on or barely halfway through.

You find it puzzling that words with an identical root can mean something radically different, even opposite; that a minor change in the letters at the end can cause a catastrophic reversal in meaning. You are unsettled when you realize that life behaves very much the same way; how a shift in circumstances can subvert everything; and how easy it is to be derailed, left behind, forgotten.

You often find yourself thinking of the *amorino dormiente* and his young mother.

You wonder what could have become of her and her little boy if she had help and support, if she was given the chance of welcoming him with open arms and raising him with love.

She could have been happy and proud of her little boy.

He might have been the one to save her. He might have been the one to save us all.