Language of Pain, Metaphors of Healing

After the howls that found the center of our bones, the baby lies still, holding her arm at an odd pitch. She’s fallen, with no words to tell us where it hurts, beyond our fierce protection. Her stunned quiet frightens us more than screaming. The doctor calmly says her arm’s not broken: a simple dislocation, then she snaps the elbow back into its seared socket. On the x-ray plate, my hand bones steady the baby’s bones for the reassuring pictures. Pain gone, joints aligned, she falls asleep, but her lips twitch the dreams that stalk her. Sorry, I murmur. Sorry. As if I’d caused the hurt, or failed to warn her. That night, a baby just her age, the ketamine-numbed star of “Infant Skull Surgery” lies limp on the TV screen. Only her eyelids, sewn shut with two black threads, seem human. The surgeon’s steely chatter almost gets us through the casual rasp of drills and the clock-clocking of the chisel that reveals the brain slick beneath the skull plate. Folding down the baby’s rubbery face, the surgeon instructs us: “It’s easy to see why poets call the face a mask.” What pain lies along the bones of that old metaphor: the face slides down and up, and the surgeon resumes his craft. Under the mask, the small machine is split apart, reset by expert hands that recalibrate her future. Post-procedure, the baby lies quiet, while her bones resettle.

For weeks our baby plays out a small ritual of mending: she places a towel on her mother’s face, her doll’s face, the dog’s face, then rubs an imagined lotion on their joints. “I fix it,” she says, exorcising the memory of pain, though at night, wasps and monsters
and enormous women in white surround her bed. “Hurt! Hurt!” she cries, mastering the first words in the uneasy dialect of pain. We can only hold her and hum wordless lullabies until she calms, the fierce message of those nursery songs at last becoming clear, and now that they’re her native tongue, we cannot sing them.

—Darcy Cummings