A Woman from the Infant Mortality Review Board Calls

By: Amanda Newell

No, I am not an addict.
Yes, I had a doctor.
No, we are not smokers.
No, I do not want you coming to our home.

You could see it on the sonogram’s chalk sketch, the clubfoot and cleft palate, fingers like vines. Some extra ones. A one-in-ten-thousand error of cell division, the specialist said. Most women miscarry before it gets this far.

Thirty hours after the pitocin and morphine, after the resident shoved his gloved fist into me to ripen my cervix with a kelp stick, I gave birth to a shiny bruised doll, small enough to fit into a wicker Easter basket and whose silence was welcome.
Judge’s commentary

Poet Lynn Emanuel, the judge of the 2015 Dobler Award, wrote this about Newell’s poem:

“Poetry faces the problem of making itself distinct from the common, everyday uses of language. Music has to make itself distinct from noise, and poetry has to take back language from the clutches of the internet, the W9 form, the committee, and the TV. It is this taking back of language that is at the heart of Amanda Newell’s powerful and brave poem, ‘A Woman from the Infant Mortality Review Board Calls.’ The title points to the poem’s struggle. The ‘Infant Mortality Review Board,’ invades the narrator’s world with ever more ridiculous and intrusive questions, and after those questions, (are you an addict, a smoker, did you have a doctor) asks to be let into the narrator’s home. Brutal language is present throughout this fierce poem: ‘the resident/shoved his gloved/fist into me/to ripen my cervix’. Against its awfulness the narrator tenderly asserts herself. Unlike the ‘specialist’ who describes what is on the sonogram as ‘club-foot and cleft palate’ the narrator/mother offers her own language ‘fingers like vines,’ ‘a shiny bruised/doll, small enough/ to fit into a wicker/Easter basket.’ The narrator brings into the poem the language of childhood, the language of a growing, green world, the language of divine birth. Beyond even this effort, however, the poet offers her stunning ending (‘and whose silence/was welcome’) in which she asserts that, perhaps, the only possibility of escaping the naming world may be the escape into death’s silence.”

About the author

Amanda Newell’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in such publications as Bellevue Literary Review, Gargoyle, Pearl, Pembroke Magazine, Poet Lore, Tar River Poetry, The Summerset Review, and War, Literature & the Arts. She has been the recipient of scholarships by both the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference and The Frost Place. In addition, she has also been the recipient of a fellowship by the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She chairs the English Department at The Gunston School in Centreville, MD, and is pursuing her MFA at Warren Wilson College.

About the judge

Lynn Emanuel is the judge of the 2015 Patricia Dobler Award. Emanuel is the author of five books of poetry: The Nerve of It, Poems New and Selected; Noose and Hook; Then Suddenly—; The Dig; and Hotel Fiesta. Her work has been featured in the Pushcart Prize Anthology and The Best American Poetry numerous times and is included in The Oxford Book of American Poetry. She is the recipient of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Poetry Series Award, the Eric Matthieu King Award from the Academy of American Poets, and, most recently, a fellowship from the Ranieri Foundation.