

Poem

Salt peanuts

My dad in the neonatal ICU as a med student
was kind of responsible, at least for five minutes
for keeping all of those babies alive,
but he tried not to think about it.
He adjusted miniature IVs.
He recorded vital signs on charts and signed as
illegibly as possible, to seem official.
The babies didn't know how frail they were.
They thought they were normal puppies.
They thought he was their dog mother.
But the machines were how they ate and breathed.
The machines in charge of keeping track
of heart function sounded like dripping tap water
or, at times, the silver resonance of a tuning fork.
The sounds crossed.
There was almost a steady rhythm.
There was almost a tune —
"Salt Peanuts" by Dizzy Gillespie, my dad thought
but none of the nurses had heard of it.
They heard heart monitors. They had clean sheets to fold.
So he had to wait thirty years to tell me and my brother
in the car on the way to dinner, as if he heard
our healthy hearts and lungs pumping, and thought of it
as if we were old enough now.

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