

POETRY

“Shirt, brown, honesty”

As I steer him through another corridor he murmurs,
“Is this part of the test? Because this place
looks like a bloody maze.” “What were the three words
I asked you to remember?” I ask the woman I am assessing.
Encircled by folds of defiant skin, her eyes, sapphires under
the fluorescent light, sparkle. She exclaims, “‘Integrity’, right?”
Unasked, he recalls, the words. She forgets, her name. He sings
passionately, letters and sounds punctuated by grunts:
poetry, in an exotic language. “Shirt, brown, honesty,”
she answers. “You know how I remembered? You have
a brown skin, you’re wearing a shirt, and you seem
like an honest young fella.” Chatters and hush.
The waiting room is reliving blaring angst, and moments of
unspoken resolve. Faces converge, names escape me now too.
Shirt. Brown. Honesty. For the tenth time this hour,
the young man says, “I am your son, mom.” His eyes
crawl over my fingers, resting on my silver watch.
A daughter says, “You have such a warm calming voice.”
I interrogate her mother, as a scientist should,
trying to find a way out of this maze. Her eyes gaze at mine.
She is trying to find her way through the labyrinth
of professionalism, to a place where we both stand
as fragile human beings. Shirt. Brown. Honesty.
It could be me on the other side of the brown
table. In fact I already am. I reach out — I must hold on.

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