



1997

My Father, in White Hospital Sheets

Autumn Pettit

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Recommended Citation

Pettit, Autumn (1997) "My Father, in White Hospital Sheets," *Inscape*: Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol17/iss1/23>

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My Father, in White Hospital Sheets

Autumn Pettit

You tell me white reminds you of toilet paper, ice cream, and snow.
And my mother's stationery,
white crackling paper, filled with the spirals
of her handwriting. Baptism, I say,
thinking of the way you must have compared the whiteness
of the skin with the skin of the others,
inside the elbow, just below the collarbone,
under the navel. And envelopes, and the white of eggs
cooked at breakfast, you continue.
I think of clean socks and t-shirts on wash
day and the way she would iron your white
shirts Saturday nights, so that you would be ready
for church, she said,
but really because the white dawn
was scraping through our windows and you weren't home
yet. At church I learned white is purity;
at this hospital I learned it is pain.
As a child I couldn't tell the difference—
my mother was both.
I asked her once, when we were
doing laundry, how bleach works. Is it a forgiveness?
Or does it simply cover the stain with white?
She told me to ask you.
But as you lie in this foreign bed, pale and submissive,
I understand that you could not
answer me, had I the faith to ask.