

THE SCARS

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2013 poetry winner

Glad to be alive . . . I study my seams.
—Arlene Eager

I cradle Reuben in my arms as he drops off to sleep,
head twisted to the left
in yoga's Sleeping Baby pose.

Soft naptime light
bathes the snow on the pine boughs,
the squirrel high-wiring down the electric line, the
threads of pulse in Reuben's neck.
I gaze at his tiny, fragile eyelids,
the sweet sleeping mouth.
And I study his pronounced
sternocleidomastoid—
that ridge of tissue from collarbone to jaw
for which I never knew the name before.
White scars paw-track along it,
evidence of his journey to survival.

At Reuben's regular visits,
Dr. Klein examines the marks.
"The ECMO scar looks great," he says,
"and you can barely see the chest tube scar."
That's the one he cut himself.
Tracing the delicate ribs on Reuben's left side,
he shows off his work to the other docs in the room.

"He can tell people he's had a wild life."
Dr. Klein gestures to his neck and affects a tough, cool voice,
"Switchblade." He points to his rib cage, "Nine millimeter."
I laugh.
How incredible,
given all the suffering that comes to us unbidden,
that we ever hurt each other on purpose.