“By Law, I Can’t Tell You Their Names”

By law,
I can’t tell you
their names
but their faces
often appear to me
in memory.

I can tell you
what they look like
when they first arrive.
Those who come
trough trauma
lie motionless
surrounded by screens
and networks of tubes.
Those who are
starting treatments
on cancer wards
may not seem sick at all.
They wear
Hawaiian shirts,
khaki shorts,
slacks, skirts,
holiday sweaters.
They sit up straight
and laugh easily,
just a hint
of anxiety
in their eager,
flush faces.

Fish for marlin,
speckled trout, and seabass.
They sew, crochet, knit,
play guitar, piano, drums,
cook, bake, travel
to South America,
ride motorcycles,
fly airplanes.

I can tell you
what they do for work.
They operate cranes.
They farm
or stay home
and take care of children.
They are architects,
college professors, writers,
doctors, veterinarians,
former nurses,
students, secretaries,
owners of craft stores
and bait shops,
social workers,
police officers,
priests, and engineers.

I can tell you
what they say they miss most
about their lives
outside the hospital:
They miss their
woodworking tools,
boats, quilts.
sewing machines.
They miss sisters, brothers, parents, cousins, and friends.
They miss the way their grandchildren run out of their houses
when they pull the car into the driveway.

I can tell you what their faces look like when the musicians
that I work with play the songs they request.
Their eyes glisten and sometimes moisten.
They clasp their hands together.
They raise up in their beds or relax their shoulders.
They gaze out windows thoughtfully. They say,
"Let me tell you about the first time I ever heard that song."

I can tell you what their hearts look like situated outside of their bodies
at the ends of their beds or beside their beds.
Large, black, jukebox-sized machines with computers on top,
they play a consistent, whooshing beat.
Hoses run from them into children's chests whose bodies tremble gently with rhythmic precision.
Children with artificial hearts play games on their iPads
make music on their iPads watch animated movies and paint while waiting for the real thing.

I can tell you what their spouses or parents who sleep near them on narrow couches
in cramped rooms filled with lifesaving medical equipment.
"This is what we're doing," say the spouses.
"Back home, friends and family are taking care of the kids and the shop, so I can be here with him."
"This is what we're doing," say the parents.
"I'm here now so she can have some time to herself to rest before they operate again."

outside funeral homes, their faces slack and worn.
After months of tears, they have none of their own left to cry, so they open their arms and shoulder the tears of others.

I can tell you how, after they have been in and out of the hospital for weeks, many of them will turn the conversation around to focus on me.
"What brought you here?" they ask.
"What do you do? Does someone pay you?"

I can tell you what they look like after they leave the hospital, and take back their lives and their hair grows back, and they put the weight back on, and the lingering limp from the still-unhealed hip or knee, the purple port scar along their collar line only add to their resilient grace.

By law, I can't tell you their names but their faces often appear to me in memory.

Photo: Dylan Klemmner, UF Health Shands Arts in Medicine writer-in-residence, creates art with Cindy Craig, UF librarian and former UF Health Shands patient. Art therapy with Klemmner was a constant source of joy for Craig during her hospital stay.