

Marie Howe

A Certain Light

He had taken the right pills the night before.
We had counted them out

from the egg carton where they were numbered so there'd be no mistake.
He had taken the morphine and prednisone and amitriptyline

and florinef and vancomycin and halcion too quickly
and had thrown up in the bowl Joe brought to the bed—a thin string

of blue spit—then waited a few minutes, to calm himself,
before he took them all again. And had slept through the night

and the morning and was still sleeping at noon, or not sleeping.
He was breathing maybe twice a minute, and we couldn't wake him,

we couldn't wake him until we shook him hard calling, *John wake up now*
John wake up—Who is the president?

And he couldn't answer.
His doctor told us we'd have to keep him up for hours.

He was all bones and skin, no tissue to absorb the medicine.
He couldn't walk unless two people held him.

And we made him talk about the movies: *What was the best moment in*
On The Waterfront? What was the music in Gone With The Wind?

And for seven hours he answered, if only to please us, mumbling
I like the morphine, sinking, rising, sleeping, rousing,

then only in pain again. But wakened.
So wakened that late that night, in one of those still blue moments

that were a kind of paradise, he finally opened his eyes wide,
and the room filled with a certain light we thought we'd never see again.

Look at you two, he said. And we did.

And Joe said, *Look at you*. And John said, *How do I look?*

And Joe said, *Handsome*.

How Some of It Happened

My brother was afraid, all his life, of going blind, so deeply
that he would turn the dinner knives away from *looking at him*

he said, as they lay on the kitchen table.

He would throw a sweatshirt over those knobs that lock the car door

from the inside, and once, he dismantled a chandelier in the middle
of the night when everyone was sleeping.

We found the pile of sharp and shining crystals in the upstairs hall.
So you understand, it was terrible

when they clamped his one eye open and put the needle in through his cheek
and up and into his eye from underneath

and held it there for a full minute before they drew it slowly out,
once a week for many weeks. He learned to *lean into it*,

to *settle down* he said, and still the eye went dead, ulcerated,
breaking up green in his head as the other eye, still blue

and wide open, looked and looked at the clock.