

# THE SPOON RIVER Poetry Review

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We leave the house late, she's mad the radio's broken  
in my car and wants to know why we never fix  
anything when it breaks. I try to gather up an answer  
for that but she doesn't want it, she just flutters  
her hand at me not to talk. There's a chill in the air,  
I can see her breath when she coughs.

We wait in Outpatient Registration. Between coughs,  
Sarah smiles, makes faces at a little boy whose arm is broken.  
A girl her age walks in and sits down with her nose in the air.  
She is completely bald. I look away, but Sarah's eyes stay fixed  
on the girl as if she knows something I don't. Her eyes flutter  
when the receptionist calls *Sarah Fisher*, and she answers.

In the CF office, Sarah gets weighed and measured, answers  
questions about what she spits out when she coughs,  
how often she goes to the bathroom, uses her inhaler and flutter—  
a little device that causes the lungs to shake, like broken  
shutters in the wind. Sarah's lost hers, but the nurse will fix  
her up with a new one before we leave. *Got to keep that air*

*coming through*, she chirps. *Like I don't know I need air*,  
Sarah whispers, back in the waiting room. I don't try to answer.  
We hear a toddler crying in the exam room. *They should fix  
this place better, I don't like to listen to people cry and cough*,  
Sarah says. *You should think what it means not to be broken.*  
*I do, honey, I promise I do*, I tell her. Her words flutter

like angry birds through the room. Just then, I catch a tattered flutter  
of denim in the Pulmonary Function Room, where they measure the  
air  
the lungs can pull in, blow out. We can hear—each try the flow is  
broken  
first by coughing, then by sobbing. A mother's voice answers  
a question the technician asks the daughter, hostage to the cough.  
As the mother and her girl come out, the mother fixes

her arm around the girl, whose splotched face tilts up, away, fixed  
at that angle like something that might spill. Her hands flutter,  
slap the sides of her thighs, like keeping time to a song, till the cough  
comes back, thick, stickey racket, and her hands jerk in the air.  
The mother asks a question the daughter doesn't answer,  
then looks back and away, toward us, her face broken.

Sarah's eyelashes flutter. *Did you see that?* she whispers. I answer,  
*Yes, I saw.* The sound of the girl's cough rips through Sarah's air.  
*Nobody can fix anything,* Sarah says, *Mama, everybody's broken.*