

# Sucking Love Out of a Straw

*(for Paul)*

By Katherine A. Keesee, OTD, OTR/L, CLWT

I want to touch those lips  
that touched the straw  
that touched the child's hands  
as he poured,  
very purposefully,  
love into and out of a paper cup.

I want to touch your lips. I want to feel  
if the cracks when you smile have always been there  
or if they develop each time you avoid  
tears, inevitable tears that  
soon will make  
that little boy  
ask you why  
and where did she go—  
the reason, of course,

to cry in the first place.

How long have you smiled with cracks in your lips?

How long has it been since you

slept by her side watching her barely

breath, watching her become little in spite of

the size of the tumor in her womb? Where you once dwelled.

Where your child first came from.

Unreasonable guilt holds you

here by her side

all the hours it takes to look closely

at her

form, disfigured, disproportionately small in limb

and large

in heart as she hangs on

and tries

unsuccessfully

to smile. As she hangs on her lips crack

in want of enough love to let go.

And all I do is stand here,

a sentinel to the body's demise.  
I push IV lines, push morphine lines.  
I push the bed down, the lights down,  
the love down  
from my eyes and bleeding heart.

As in the dark,

the darkness now chiseled into  
the definition of your face—those lips that  
tremble, that mouth that quakes,  
your eyes that hold steady and refuse to look away, the tears  
that finally fall when your child  
is not  
looking. Then,  
that face you make brave as he enters the room,  
looks at early dying and does only what he thinks will do.

His mother's lips are cracked  
from not eating  
enough, not drinking enough,  
as yours are cracked  
from smiling

too much at a growth too big  
to ignore, a growth too big to fight anymore.

The child who knew, better than you,  
better than me, than her—  
*we can only do what we can do.*

The child, your child, her child  
is old enough to know how to  
fill a paper cup with love,  
hoping this love  
can be sucked from a straw, and heal  
the cracks we don't always see.

How to fill a paper cup with love  
and place a straw  
to the unmoveable body,  
to the cracked lips of an unrecognizable  
mother, unrecognizable except for the father who smiles  
with the same cracks,  
the same bleeding cracks  
in a heart with the same broken  
hope that enough love exists to let go.

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## *About the Author*



Katherine A. Keesee, OTD, OTR/L, CLWT is an acute care occupational therapist, a certified lymphedema therapist, and a cancer rehabilitation specialist working in Richmond, VA. She also teaches graduate- and professional-level clinical skill development addressing death and dying as part of the life span. Both her creative and clinical work is deeply influenced by the death of her brother during the AIDS crisis and the private, discreet ways in which resiliency shows up in the quotidian details of our lives.