At work, my friend Charlotte wears flowered scrubs. She is a rag doll, an angel, worn soft from many washings. She pads softly through the room.

Surrounded by plastic and latex, metal rolling carts, stacks of linens, diapers, cases of formula, IV stands garlanded with tubing, she makes her way deftly through this jungle of non-human, non-person—to calm another crying infant: Baby, baby, baby. She nods into their startled faces—the world so much and all at once—her thumb lightly across the forehead, hand cupped over the pulsing fontanel. She whispers, I know, I know, I know. Sweet boy. Sweet girl. (What happened to make her this way? Such sweetness as hers grows with pain. It glows an oxygen-rich red.)

She changes the diapers. She pats. She talks about security measures. She shows me the curled, inked feet. She shows me the tiny one working hard: breathe, breathe.

It seems everyone is working with him, thinking about what alveoli do. His puckered mouth flutters. Machines do their possible work . . . . The swaddled babies sleep, wake, and protest. Breathe, breathe.

My friend moves silently among the bassinets ready to hold these children that are hers, not hers, and hers again.