

# Breaking Bad News

We practice all afternoon, telling each other,  
"I have some bad news. Your mother has died." Sometimes  
it's a sister, a son. We say, "We did everything,  
everything we could" and "I'm so sorry" and  
"Do you want to see her now?"

Our teacher is an emergency physician. She does this all the time.  
We ask, "What if the family gets angry?" She says, "That's why  
you always stand near the door."

We ask, "What if we start to cry?" She says, "If you can help it,  
don't cry. But it probably won't make things worse."

We ask, "Do you always say the word dead?" She says,  
"I try to say it twice. Usually, even then, they'll ask—  
'So you mean he's dead?' 'Yes,' I say, 'He's dead.'"

We ask, "What if they want to know if he was in pain?" She says, "Say no."  
She pauses. "Although," she says, "I believe  
the feat of dying is not un-painful. The brain must  
panic, even if the body doesn't. But," she continues, "Say no.  
Always just say no."

Sarah Leeper

Ms. Leeper is a member of the Class of 2012 at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University. This poem won first prize in the 2011 *Pharos* Poetry Competition.  
Ms. Leeper's e-mail address: sarah\_leeper@brown.edu.

Illustration by Jim M'Guinness.

