Sidetracked
By Marianne Kunkel

How stupid of me to mistake the click
of someone's gas pump for my own,
and on a morning so bone-cold I'm robed
in a pricey wool coat. Gasoline—interrupted
because I yanked out the nozzle before
my tank was full—gushes onto my waist,
thighs, pools onto my boots. A scarfed man
paying for gas peeks around his brick column
to gawk at me, the soaked, stinky idiot.
Any other day, when I climb back into my car,
my son in the passenger seat would sniff
and ask what happened. But his mouth
is a badly cross-stitched thread, thin and wobbly
from crying. We just left the tiny office
of his pediatric cardiologist. While my son's
health is fine—one flap short of the usual
three in the valve that pumps blood
from his heart to aorta, a minor birth defect—
his doctor isn't fine. The man tending
my son since infancy, once-a-year
check-ups for the last ten years, looked frail
this morning: plaid shirt a kite full of air
more than fat, muscle. His voice, once
bubbly and sweet as the root beer my son craves,
was flat. And those rattly coughs, one shaky foot.
The man who last year zoomed around
the exam room on a black, backless stool,
peeled EKG stickers off my son's freckly chest
and yapped about pirate literature I should read
now has the posture of a bowed, barnacled mast.
How does a patient ask *Are you feeling OK?*
What doctors confide in their patients—dozens
a day, the rote intimacy of always giving,
not receiving, comfort? So I held back, said
See you next year with the mechanical ease
of a flimsy comb skating over knotted hair.
Past the appointment desk, down a stairwell
in an empty hallway, I hugged my son and told him

we may not see his doctor again. At home
I fling my fumy coat on a lawn chair to air out,
certain it'll need dry-cleaned, but by evening it's cured—
back to smelling of department store perfume.
If gasoline, that dirty business, can fade
so fast, why must human sickness fester and erode?
Why to a man who cupped his stethoscope, huffed,
warming it before resting it on my newborn's chest?