

New Patient Appointment For A New Therapist

Minutes into the session,
holding myself frozen at my desk,
my spine shivers in its confinement,
unable to bolt for the door behind me,
only three feet, too far for safety.

I discard the impulse to run
and attend his pounding fist,
on my gray Steelcase desk.

My heart answers with blood pulse
pounding in my ears.
The man's senseless shouting voice
continues to shake my office.
I breathe—wait,

master the bullied boy inside me.

The shouting continues,
now ready to kill.
He shouts he will:
 He will.
 He will kill.

His face red,
 the hard in his voice.

Scenes of blood on the walls
 bodies in the sagebrush
 pass through me.

A question of possible victims
 hangs between us.

My young therapist heart calms,
 wait,
 wait...

Hold firm with steady eye contact,
just let the threat pass.

He gradually tires of his own helpless rage.
He and I watch together, as the angry shield
gives way revealing the depth of unhappiness.

He starts his real story.

As the conversation continues,
he agrees to sit down,
raises the recliner footrest.

At the end of the hour,
we make the next appointment,
and he turns to leave the office.
I see the .357 in his back pocket.
How afraid must he have been
to need that.

Glad I didn't know.

I ask him to leave the gun
in the car next time.

The Prowling Man

Contact is the trigger for the man
and the young boy who knows

his home is not safe.
The boy runs.

The man chases.
For this primordial reptile response,

there is no psychogenic cause.
There is only the immediate:

Two hundred pounds of man charge.
Fifty pounds of boy cower.

Both would say,
"I don't know why."

The meaningless replication
of generations.

The nuclear disaster
of so many nuclear families.

Drama in the Office

There are exhilarating moments
When I get to be Judd Hirsh.
A Timothy Hutton storms in
Like he wants to sweep all the books
Off my table to crash to the floor.

Perhaps once in five years,
Ordinary People bring their lives
Into my office to explode
The mechanism of their moment
Into metamorphosis.

For these few, the denouement
Makes me the blood-spattered audience.
I sit in awe of the power
Of the cathartic leap my patient makes.

The method of these actors
Demands that they speak only
A scalded soul truth
Of anguished guilt,
Secret betrayal,
Or righteous anger.

In each of these moments,
My job is to keep the therapy room
Safe from judgment or interruption.
I do not fear feelings like lightning
That emblazon our nervous systems.
We may be shocked
But not destroyed by the power
That overwhelmed their defenses
Until now.
When they see
I am not destroyed by their anguish,
They can survive it.
If I tolerate the wild terrors they create
In the room and in me, they can heal.

I can face any rage that they feared
Would destroy them.
I stand for healing whatever blooms
And feel the wounds with them.

In the quiet after the storm,
We are exhausted and cleansed
Until our next meeting.

When alone again,
I pay the smaller price,
Stoop to pick up the books
As if to replace the props
For the next scene,
Where I might be granted a role.

The Psychologist Returns to Therapy

Leaving my office to sit in the other chair
in her office, I ask another human
to hold up the mirror for me despite the fear
that a bright image might make me stone.

I sit in my limitations to try to answer
the question of the Sphynx on the road to freedom.
Can I crawl to happiness through necessary pain
to rise from four and stand on two legs?

Perhaps I am Orpheus without a harp?
Perseus without the shield?
Will my therapist find a new boulder
for me to push up this life's mountain?

Stuck again in my heart's latest labyrinth,
a part of me knows the way out of any maze.
I have only to put my hand on the wall
and not take it off until I am out.

I ask her to be my steady wall,
where I can keep this shaky hand,
as I look into her mirror.

But, Oh,
the problem
of that Minotaur.

The Privilege

I would not have known to call my patient, but
a family member called to cancel her appointment.

Thinking of her lying unconscious in a distant city, dying,
Her urgent need made me overcome my shock and helplessness.

We had worked so hard to heal near-deadly wounds
that bound her at the stakes of childhood brutality.
Now, there must be something I could do to overcome
the indignity of life's new assault against her.

Could she not have a moment of comfort, to be at ease?
That ICU doctor answered and said there was nothing else
he could do.

Her husband and children were already on a plane
expecting to be too late.

There was only enough O₂ getting through
to keep her brain alive for a short time.
I asked her doctor,
 “You may think this weird,
 but would you put the phone
 to her ear?”

He said,
 “At this point, I'll try anything.”

and ran a line to her pillow.

I talked to her about choosing life, her children,
what she had struggled so hard to heal.
I drew out memories inside our shared years,
reaching for moments of innocent light.

She may not have heard, but perhaps I was
in that white automated room 2000 miles away.
Twenty minutes later, someone picked up the phone.
Something had changed.

The pulse of her life was quickening
O² had increased its flow.
In the chart, a change of heart was noted.
They put the phone back to her ear.
An hour longer and she breathed stronger.

I put down the phone,
shaking.