

These Warded Women of New Jersey

Not far from where Washington Crossed the Delaware
almost two hundred years before,
I leave the lively, often violent wards of adolescents.
The nursing supervisor needs me
at the other end of the hospital grounds
for patients at the other end of their lives.

The tall grey block of the building reflects the light
into the hall of a day room. A chorus of silent women
lolling, almost mannequins, in a gallery of chairs.
The lone staff member invites me in.

The only sounds in the large room are the words
of my fellow nursing tech. Two young men
must gently levitate each passive body,
from whom continence has fled.

As we raise the first soul between us,
I feel her frail bones in my arms,
and gray hair whispers to my neck and beard.
The ancient head leans against my chest,
brings me close to her neck's white skin.
From the view over her shoulder, the back
of the open patient gown discloses more white.

The other psych tech pulls the absorbent wafer
from the Naugahyde chair, replaces the dry one,
now ready to receive bare skin.
I gradually release her birdlike weight
as my gentle grip lets her settle to her resting perch.

I held the next and the next against my chest,
I don't recall if the moments of our connection
brought any recognition, and the next, and the next.
We gave what blessing we could to forty or fifty women.

My memory is of the quiet room we moved efficiently through.
Did we awaken the longing to be held?
Was the need to be touched even briefly served?

A Life, A Profession

We both know that the battery pack on his belt
fends off the killing pain
of his own metastatic cancer.
In less than a year he will lie like
our patient.

Our First Appointment

Minutes into the session
I remain seated at my desk.
That gray, state-issued Steel Case desk
holds up under the pounding fist.
My great grandfather's glass inkwell
rattles with each hammering blow.

Electric fear runs up my spine.
I cannot bolt for the door behind me,
only 3 feet, too far for safety.

I discard the impulse to escape
as my patient's fist and voice crescendo.
The hammer in my heart rises as well.
I breathe and wait; work to
master the bullied boy inside me.

The shouting continues, now ready to kill,
even to kill a 9-year-old child,
as long as, it's not his own 9-year-old.
I believe him and wonder whether
tales of murder of mayhem await me.
Is he telling me he has already killed?

My young therapist's heart calms.
I wait, able to let the threat pass:
The batter watching the brush back.
fastball come high inside,
I hold firm with steady eye contact.

He tires of his helpless rage,
I bring my clinical observation
to the hard unhappiness this man bares.
The conversation continues
and the man agrees to sit down.

He starts his real story,
better to raise the recliner footrest.

At the end of the hour, he turns to leave the office;
I see the .357 in his back pocket.
How afraid he must have been to need that.
Glad I didn't know.
I ask him to leave the gun in the car next time.

Returning to Therapy

I leave my office to sit in the other chair
In your office. I ask another human
To hold up the mirror for me.
I fear the shining shield might make me stone.

I sit in my own limitations
Trying to answer the question of the Sphynx
On the road to freedom.
Am I crawling to happiness through necessary pain
Or shooting my own heel?

Perhaps I am Orpheus without a harp.
Perseus without the shield.

Stuck in life's latest labyrinth again.
A part of me knows the means out of the maze.
I have only to put my hand on the wall
And not take it off until I am out.

I ask you to be my steady wall,
Where I can keep a shaking hand,
And look into your mirror.

But, Oh,
The problem
Of that Minotaur.

Wave on the Horizon

We sit together watching the wave approaching.
It appears white froth, hints of darkness
Watching your nightmare rising above the sun.
It's coming for you with sharks in the surf
And fangs in the sand.
I sit so you won't have to be alone while you wait.
All that can be done has been.

Soon there will be a widow where now there is a wife.
Later I travel to sit with you while you wait from your bed.
We drink weak tea and acceptance of what is being lost.
Our words are almost through with just time
To say adieu before your eyes are covered by the sea.

Back in my life, my next patient, alive,
Engaged in the process of progress to her future.
My distracted glance out the window.
When will that ripple of fate next surge
On the horizon's edge?