

Thanksgiving: Visiting My Brother on the Ward

Peter Schmitt

Behind the thick, crosshatched glass of the cruiser,
my brother, back for the holiday, breathes
more slowly. A phalanx of uniforms
cloaks the open door, murmuring to him
where he sits. The carving knife is somewhere
out of reach, none of us so much as scratched.
Inside, the bound bird cools on the butcher block.

Later that night I move through many doors, each
locking behind me, each inlaid with the same
heavy glass as the squad car. Through the last
I see my brother's face, fixed as on a graph,
ordinate, abscissa. When he sees mine
he retreats from the common room to his own,
a bare cell he shares with a narrow bed.

He will not speak to me, at first. His fingers
move in perpetual chafe, like a mantis,
his lifelong nervous habit, the edges
of a newspaper shredded on the bed.
This time, his eyes say, we have betrayed him
as never before. This time, he seems to say,
he cannot find a way to forgive us.

At last I persuade him to join the others
finishing the meal, their plastic utensils
working the meat, their low voices broken
by stray whoops of inappropriate laughter.
We sit, though, in a separating silence,
my brother's hand already eroding
his napkin, eyes distant with medication.

If only he were faithful to himself
and took his daily pills... But what is the point
of such a constancy when the world itself
has so profoundly turned away? As tonight
I will leave him here, leave all of them here,
the psychotics and depressives, my brother,
to lie on their beds and stare at their ceilings,

and I know that for at least this visit
he will not come home, where our parents now sit
in darkness, their faces streaked and damp. And when
we drive him to the airport, an unmarked
police car following as an escort,
he might be a foreign dignitary
bearing developments back to his country...

For now, though, it is just two brothers, beneath
a glaring bulb. The expression on his face
would ask, *Have you gotten what you came for?*
And again I have no answer for him.
But there, at the floor of the bed, all around
the room, are crumbs of paper, as if he were
leaving a trail by which he might be found.

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