

PROLOGUE

In the summer of 1955, when I was eighteen, I worked as a nurses' aide in the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital, in New Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

It was before the time of psychoactive drugs, and knowledge of Alzheimer's disease, and care for the abilities of the "developmentally challenged".

And so these old dark hospital buildings of brick, wood, and barred windows, retained together the "mentally retarded", the "senile", and the "insane".

The experiences, images, and feelings of my time there stayed strongly with me, and bits of verse began to form. Finally, in 1989, it was time to bring to fruition, to heal, to complete.

Some polishing, clarifying, has been done since then. But mostly the work has stayed in my "bottom drawer" until now, when I present this piece to you. [This prologue was written in 1998 when I self-published]

Names used are fictitious. "Dr. Cumberland" was the chief psychiatrist and head of the hospital.

And so, this story, these stories, separate, and one, past, and continuing.

Graveyard shift,

Before
stars lawn trees
water breeze
freedom breathing
space

Fear pacing
tall and thin
arms wrapped
hands locked
crossed tight to
shoulders
restraining chaos.

Behind
brick bars

Heavy I
must

Leave
unlock
enter lock
me

Inside

Behind
red
ribbons
yellow
ribbons
weave

bright
silver

braids

But
I have the key

flowing
down

What of those
who have
what if I did

not

1

2

Tiny white-haired pinkness
Sad forever.

Touch sing
Everybody has a laughing place
just for her
then
her eyes

Her head towering above me
my eyes meeting the middle
of her back

I prod her along
gently but firmly
to the cubicles.

If she resists

smile

with my two small hands

and perhaps

I clamp her arms

this small

behind her back

light

and tame an Amazon

will stay

awhile

3

4

Large stolid

Nursie! Nursie!

she

Get me! Get me!

rocks cornered

foot to foot

Steel-walled bed.

arms weaving

Small mugwump

rhythms

shrill-ly bouncing

weaving high

head tossing

weaving low

calling bobbing

over over

under over

fingers

over over

flat long

.

knife-edged.

Nothing wrong with me!

Only here because

skin

I wouldn't marry the damn

flaky scales.

doctor!

She doesn't care.

over over

She laughs.

under over

We love her.

over over

5

6

There is a troop

Long gangly

six

all legs and arms

that stand all day

a great white spider

each in hospital gown

that snuffles

hands clasping wrists

and smiles and smiles

hands gripping elbows

heads hung

Touch her shoulder

silent gentle

Toilet time

never stirring

and snuffling

smiling

Until one

she slithers

somehow strays

from the bed

beyond the wooden door

to the wooden floor

into the empty hall

and stands now

and hospital gowned

in her brief grey gown

heels and hands

wrists clasped head hung

bare bums her way

past the beds

yet proud

to the cubicles.

sentinel guard

But if sometimes

on the floor

I lift her

by her side

snuffling

and carry her

two

so light

large brown rolls

7

laughing
she pats my face
and cuddles.

The professionals
do not approve.

8

Mrs. Dragovitch, chief aide
just begs for a rhyme.
Squat round-tub refugee
from some grey camp guard
she waddles
and pushes
and pokes the gentle ones
in the stomach.

Toilet Time

Nudge the quiet ones
hands clasping wrists
hands gripping elbows
heads hung

gently
shove move stop
shove move stop
to the cubicles.

She silently snatches covers
from the sleeping blind
then shoves them
groping wildly
before her
to the cubicles.

Turn one
lift her gown
sit her down.

She grins and says
they are not sick.

Repeat
Repeat
Repeat

Yet she shies away from
an aimlessly waved slipper.
She cannot understand
the madness
and is afraid.

Return
stand wipe
each one

Still if she pokes that gentle
one more time I'll poke her
hard
round tub
and she'll go
Woosh!

Herd them
nudge move stop
nudge move stop
nudge move
stop.

So back in place
they stand
gentle
never stirring.

9

10

Mrs. Donaldson
bound in her bed
for safety
wiggles free
shatters her hip.

Dorothy comes to mop the floors.
She talks to the Air Force Boys
directing operations for
saving the Pussy Cat Girls
from Cumberland's Crooks.

At meal times
she will not touch
the offered spoon
until assured
the cows are milked

She replies sharply
to my Good Morning.
Says there was an army
of little men
fighting under her bed

and
all the children fed.

11

all night
and she couldn't sleep
for hearing the bones crunch.

12

Suddenly there is
a screeching
careening through the ward
a gentle
is racing
screaming
clawing doors
doubling over
shrieking
shattering the air
fleeing demons
shaking window bars
smashing a fist between
splintering glass.

Then
it is finished.
she is quiet
gentle again.

From the hand
held silently
before her

slow

blood

drops

13

Annie helps.
Thirty-two
here since
sixteen
homey
smiling
and almost
able
to care for
herself.

She sorts flowers
sent from funerals

Shw places
clean sheets
ready

She feeds
patients
better than some

Annie cannot
tell or explain
but "Annie knows"
so nurses
follow
when she leads

And
"Annie's happy here"

for her
ever

14

When the beds are
cleaned for lunch
and serving's just begun
every day there's trouble
with Granny Mackelson

Every day the trouble is
a little number two
she says that it is
in her bed
and what is she to do?

It's in my bed.
I don't know what it is.

BEGINNING

Dinner
Ward C
Bed 3
Small silver
eighty-two
sightless

so proper
and correct.

She was
a schoolmarm.

of her time.

into the warm
receiving water

Cradle her
most carefully
or she will just
slide under
and be gone.

19

20

The lady has
the look and air
of a brilliant
research scientist.

skin hair
bones and

She asks for
her husband
then cries and says
it doesn't matter.

Bed sores.
angry volcanoes
deep red
white-rimmed
growing larger on
heels hips
buttocks shoulders.

Hold her
stroke her head
and the stroking hand

goes down
into her head.

Wash salve
Encircle with
small rubber rings.
Her body floats
on childish toys.

Hair covers
the absence
of skull

Cover gently
She will not last long.

and brain.

Care for the next.

Car accident.
Her husband died.

Glance.
Stillness.
She has gone.

It took many doctors
many hours

Six inches away
I was not told.
No trumpets sounded.

to save her

Alone
unknown
unheld
she died.

they say

Tend her
Wash the empty hollows.

21

Wrap her safely
in her cool white shroud.

22

Twenty beds
Twenty
mouths to feed
faces to wash

