

I soon had that routine:

Wake; eat; chlorpromazine;

Day room; eat; medication; take a turn

Around the grounds; repeat;

Patches of sleep; wake; eat...

And so on. There was nothing else to learn.

I strayed, unpresent and askant,

One among all the mutually irrelevant.

Irrelevant, askance:

Such is the vigilance

Of those who quit the kingdom of the sane.

Work, the great world's affairs

Are nothing to them. Theirs

Is tendance on the crack in a window pane,

A sister's enigmatic smile

Years past, a headline that conceals a secret file,

Marooned on their own islands

Of individual silence.

One day in the refectory as I,

Hazed with an inward stare,

Sat vacant on my chair,

I felt a sudden presence occupy

The next—our shoulders close, but held

Apart, like two magnetic norths, pressed and repelled.

And stirring to advance  
A slight and sidelong glance,  
I glimpsed her in a floral dressing gown,  
Her hair a dusty blond.  
She did not look beyond  
Her own held space, and maybe had sat down  
At random, not because she chose  
Especially me to sit beside, from all of those.

And yet she was aware  
Someone, *something*, was there—  
Not from that outer realm of sense and health;  
Rather, a witness, or  
A co-conspirator  
From her imagined, inner commonwealth.  
What she did then played out the script  
She wrote there and alone could fathom and decrypt,

An act of her sick mind,  
And work of art, to find  
And fashion some small order in the chaos.  
She rose, and checked to see  
That I (or one in me  
Whom she projected from her conjured dais)  
Was looking at her and, assured  
My eyes and my attention watched with one accord,

Began to spin tiptoe  
In balanced vertigo,  
A dervish, arms outstretched, her body pending  
In what seemed, as she wheeled,  
To be its own force field,  
Sweet as the honey from the sun descending  
Through the refectory glass, exiled  
But sanctioned in that light, inviolable, wild,

Her whirling fingertips'  
Centripetal ellipse  
Drawing every glimmering shard and shiver  
Of the mind-shattered day  
To one restored array:  
What she was bound in madness to deliver.  
Dark paean. I, who months alone,  
It felt, inhabited my own exclusion zone,

Watched and bore witness to  
The beauty that she drew,  
The wounded state of grace she verified—  
Last gift from my unwell  
Hallucinated cell,  
I thought. The dance was done. I turned aside,  
And back, and she was gone, and where  
She'd been—a vortex crackled in the vacant air.

\*This poem is based on a passage in an autobiographical essay by John Burnside, entitled "Who Chose Them?", which appeared in the *London Review of Books*, 10 September 2009.

