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poems
by
doctors

Mrs Noone

Rowena Warwick

she is all talk,
layers of cigarette smoke, her filthy coat,
her thick Irish accent, muffle her words.
I tune in. *It hurts*, she says, *I hurt*.
I . . . her stream of noise goes on and on like an echo.
She says *I might as well be dead*.

I'm on my own now, everyone else is dead,
the carer comes, skips the evenings, won't talk,
it's always the same, every day an echo
of the last. I say, *first, let's get you out of that coat*.
I think of the patients waiting, I don't want her to feel hurt,
I must listen, not hurry, I must let her have her words.

All we have in this room are words
to get her on to the couch so we can help her, deaden
the pain, her knees, her hips, the places that hurt,
but Mrs. Noone beats us back with her talk
of Ireland, the old days. She hangs on to her stinking coat
holds it to herself like armour, giving us only its echo.

I know, in my own life, there is no space for any echo,
colleagues, husband, home, I am surrounded by words.
So I coax her, attempt to liberate her coat,
my fingers sink into the moth-eaten fur, its deadness
lingers. Her frown deepens but her talk
continues. *That last doctor . . . like razors . . . hurt*.

She looks at me. *Is that needle going to hurt?*
Her eyes with their sagging lower lids have an echo
behind them, which says more than all her talk.
I'll do my best I say, but my words
seem inadequate to comfort this woman with her long-dead
husband, her handbag of treasures and her pernicious coat.

If only we could get her to lie down, lose the coat.
The clock creeps on but we are halted, each wasted minute hurts,
the assistant and I share a glance, swallow up the dead
time. She won't move, this garrulous, pungent, echo
of a woman, though she must know that our words
and our time are metered, despite all our talk.

Then the coat gives way, her mouth slackens, all echoes
end as her body is revealed, in all its hurt. Her words
stop. The air between us is dead, without talk.

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