



Caring for Another Woman

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KAREN AN-HWEI LEE

Caring for Another Woman

1. *Desire understood in the absence of conventional expression.*

Of hidden trauma, one imagines a map to see
water routes in another soul, to decipher silence
through indirect speech, motion of her hands
towards water, for instance, how does thirst know
the inner volition of another woman, how does empathy
filter experience like a radio humming quietly in another room
to a blind woman's shoes, why is one song inside
a woman not a song in another, while a patient sleeps,
passes the song through a dream of fused words,
absent information recovered, codified, you know she thirsts,
imagining a glass of water, an image understood by looking
at the space in her hand cradled for a glass, desire
understood in the absence of conventional expression,
she thirsts, yes, in the absence of words.

2. *Of words, dreaming of medicine or antidote.*

An eye in the night is an open field
envisioning medicine or antidote,
tincture of laudanum, dim bromides,

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constellation of pointed desires,
open field composition, polysemous
consciousness, a soul meshed
outside the empirical world, sending
concretely imagined perception
into the visual field of another person,
in this moment of encounter, what is offered,
valued more than a unit of lumens, angle
streaming from one candle to the eye,
irradiating empathy or a lucent
conical section of soul assayed
for the presence of hidden afflictions,
shadows telling internal duress,
an envelope of pressed rose oil,
intercessory prayer traverses miles,
voiced stroma or field of chronic waking
where the word never slumbers, insomnia
lasting in the world, is this the universe,
closed iodine eye, is this not the truth
showing how to traverse a chasm, blood ladder
of words, true medicine or antidote for sin
in the personal form of irradiating love
delivered through the man of sorrows
saying *talitha, kum* to a quiet girl in bed,
watching as she rises still dressed for sickness,
breathing, her face flushed with rose brilliance
through the ceaseless intercession of living saints
and a thousand compassionate cries.

3. *Of her own bedside manner, pouring water.*

Entering the room, the caretaker notices
her own bedside manner, pouring water,
moving quietly around a body in the bed,
another woman, her face turned to the wall,

silent mirror seeking no image of herself,
mother who gave birth in the morning
breathing now before the journey home
in a lightless room, no window, was this
a finishing house for girls, coat room
for punishment after school, girls who talk back,
wear unironed uniforms, stand out of line,
stirring in bed, the patient shows both sides of herself,
abrasive paper coated with flint, the other meek
as the first receiving cloth in a birthing room,
a person too young to wonder what beauty is,
what breath is, whether earned, cultivated, or sold
bottled as perfume, burned or citrus, musk or floral
with notes of mineral hardness or charisma,
whether austerity and hardest qualities
are judged on a calibrated scale of minerals
starting with talc and ending on diamond,
with new ones added, vitreous pure silica
and garnet, whether gradations of weather
increase the resilience of her immune system
as resilience shines through unpolished facets
turned to the wall, yearning to hold her peace,
her space as she listens to the caretaker move quietly,
I am the other woman in this room,
folding hospital corners for sheets, turning
the bed pan, adding a vase of white star narcissus
whose thin stellate shadows lance the room.

4. *A thousand gradations of gray.*

Eyes closed, the blind woman says
isn't the moon made of lavender jade
or a medicine cabinet for eye drops,
a pair of wings and a jewel box,
a box of pencil shavings and graphite,

allotrope of woe and hinged gray lines
pointing underground to a mine,
uncarved blocks of sadness,
marble peaches and pale lavender stone,
a bird in a gray velvet suit, a shaft
for mineral gradations of gray
ashen silver graphite leaden coal
for the pale grove of an underground moon
surfaces in a lake singing from lavender
to the four o'clock hour.