

POETRY

Hospitalized at Christmas and Long-Distance Grandma

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In my reading, these two poems, one by a (then) 3rd year medical student, the other by a distinguished family medicine behavioral scientist, are about two things: the contextualized nature of human life and the miracles necessary when we lose that context. Human beings are particularistic creatures emerging from and anchored by history, family, relationships, culture, faith, place, and life experience. Plucked from these orienting details, we become unbelievable, pathetic, and two dimensional. Brian McMichael writes movingly of his “long-distance” grandma, whom he knew only in one way—“brow-beaten lost and pathetic” when she visited him in California, separated from the context, roots, and place in the world that defined her. Yet in her home environment, hard-scrabble and in decline as it was, full of tough rather than romantic memories, she is strong, “lucid and vibrant.” The details of her life, demanding and sometimes ugly, shimmer with authenticity. He discovers in his grandma a stranger to be proud of.

Howard Stein’s poem delves deeply into the worst of all possible shattered life con-

texts—the patient hospitalized at Christmas. The patient in the hospital is the grandma in California—uprooted, detached, reduced to a mere caricature of self, with all that is most meaningful left behind or considered irrelevant. Bereft of social moorings, everyone caught up in the vacuum of the hospital at Christmas—patients, families, and physicians alike—despairs. To cope with the wrongness of it all, they develop “audacious expectations.” Having lost their solidity, their only hope lies in a miracle that restores them to wholeness. For the hospitalized patient, isolated from the significance and groundedness of her ordinary life, her new circumstances are fraught with peril. If “divine alchemy” fails to materialize, the alternative is a continued shadow existence.

Like obverse sides of a coin, these poems remind us that, fixed within the unique particularity of our lives, we can demonstrate unexpected strength and vigor. Yet, thrust into the alien surroundings of the hospital (or California!), forced to leave much of our selves behind, we become diminished, vulnerable, and dependent on the miraculous to heal our brokenness. Brian McMichael paid a “home visit” to his grandmother and in so doing was rewarded by a glimpse of a real person. It is up to the physicians on duty at Christmas—or any other time—to uncover the richness and abundance, the vitality and complexity of their charges, and in doing so help create the miracle of restoring people to themselves.

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