

## POETRY

### Power, Borders, and Boundaries

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We include three apparently very different poems in this issue. One is a paean to the patient's family doctor; another references a dying cancer patient whose doctor does not want to let him go; and the third differentiates the living narrator from a group of deceased mental patients.

Yet at some level, all three poems are about power, borders, and boundaries. Foucault taught us that power is not the exclusive property of any one group or individual. Power is simultaneously present and pervasive in all situations. In Hedy Weiner's poem, the multitalented and versatile doctor seems omnipotent, a revered master, the allayer of fears, the fix-it, go-to handyman, a trusted, brave guide for the patient, a pursuer of "truth." Yet in the sixth stanza, the admiring patient subtly shapechanges into a sly interrogator. Oh master, she begs, since you are so incredibly wonderful, could you please answer these little questions for me? Can knowing death help one live? Can you explain the mysteries of the natural world? How can a broken heart be mended? The poem ends in silence, raising a more subversive question: How perfect can this doctor be if he can't answer the narrator's most pressing queries? Further,

the narrator asks the doctor, "Where do you end and I begin?" This question challenges the unambiguous boundaries supposedly in place between physician and patient and intimates that all the distinctions that apparently separate them (power, knowledge, roles, health, expertise) are fragile at best. The powerful doctor may be as dependent on his patient as she is on him.

Howard Stein's poem deepens our contemplation of these issues of power and boundaries. Here, a terminally ill cancer patient is ready to die, but not ready to disappoint his doctor, not ready to give up on himself if his doctor is not ready to give up. In this poem we find a similar mutual dependency between doctor and patient as is revealed in "medicine man." Going further, we discover that the patient even exercises a certain perverse power over his physician: he is, in effect, keeping the doctor going by going on himself. As the poem asks, "Who is treating whom?" It turns out that it is the doctor who may be more afraid of death than the patient, the doctor who is weak and the patient who is strong. Once again, we see that, unlike our idealization of the doctor-patient relationship, doctors may be more vulnerable and patients more important to their lives and well-being than is generally recognized.

In the ironically titled "Remembering the Dead," about a group of institutionalized psychiatric patients abandoned and

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unmourned in death, Jan Goldman shows us how the dead exert power over the living, and how the boundaries between the dead and the living are much more strongly blurred than we would like to think. The narrator is haunted by the complete erasure of these dead crazy people. But, in a reversal of tone in some ways reminiscent of the sixth stanza shift in Weiner's poem, the focus in "Remembering the Dead" abruptly changes in the final stanza. The narrator herself abandons these forgotten dead to their forgotten fates and defiantly turns the attention to herself, creating a seemingly impenetrable barrier between herself and the threat they pose. *Her* family loves her; *their* families betrayed them; *she* "holds the future hostage," while *they* have been devoured by their future; *she* will have a "marked grave," whereas *their* graves are covered only with numbered stones. Yet the narrator must also reluctantly reveal that these borders between herself and these vanished souls are flimsier than she hopes. It is only "for a little time" that she can hold back the tidal wave of death; only temporarily can she "escape the dread of no one knowing we were here." These mental patients exert a powerful, inevitable pull from beyond the grave.

Partly these poems may be read as examinations of the subversive and infiltrating expressions of power—the power of ap-

parently worshipful patients to challenge the omnipotence of their doctors; the power of patients to "treat" the anxieties and fears of their doctors; and the power of stigmatized, forgotten, deceased patients to threaten and unbalance the living and the healthy. Partly these poems are about the lack of firm boundaries to separate and protect us from what frightens us—the boundaries that keep one doctor safe from the limits of his profession; that keep another doctor safe from the death of his patient; and that keep the healthy, the nonsick safe and protected from inevitable dissolution and death.

All of these poems invite us to be at once more humble and more open, as health care professionals and as human beings. They ask us to recognize that the people with the power don't have all the power; that the people ostensibly most vulnerable are often more powerful and engaged than we realize; and that the borders between the healthy and the ill, between power and vulnerability, between control and lack of control, are more porous than we can readily accommodate. At the same time, this view encourages an awareness that life fundamentally is not about masters and servants, winners and losers, saviors and victims. With all our vulnerabilities, limitations, and fears, we are all in this life together. And in that awareness, we may find comfort and hope.