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Shane Seely

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WALT WHITMAN VISITS THE CARPENTER CARE HOME
IN TUNKHANNOCK, PENNSYLVANIA

Shane Seely

Because I cannot, will not, no matter what the price in guilt, go
in there,
I send him in my stead, robust and white-bearded, bright-eyed, arms
open, face open, singing, prayerful, impudent, spry,
to walk the bright halls with the low fat railings and the stars cut
from construction paper on the walls
among the broken, the bent-backed elderly, the stooped babblers
with their caved-in mouths, who wave their arms and call him
son or scream for help;
he tips his hat to them or stops to talk, to take the hands of the one
who says *I love you, I love you, I love you*, to her shoes,
to console the one in the wheelchair who pleads for someone to bring
her back her bicycle, she's lost it.

Because I can't he strides, undaunted by the smell of lives attenuated
in a dry and constant heat
to my grandmother's room, 212, where she sits waiting in her
wheelchair, watching the Christmas lights on the bare poplars
in the courtyard out her window.
She doesn't recognize him. But he is gentle, playful, telling jokes and
asking questions,
until she calls him Sonny Jim and offers to make her famous macaroni
and cheese and put him in her guest room for the night. He
looks around her tiny room
at the lamp stand and the hospital bed, at her roommate laboring
through sleep,
and respectfully declines.

My grandmother tells him that her mind isn't what it used to be
as she asks him for the fifth time how his wife is; each time he
smiles and says "fine,"

then teases her about her boyfriend, an addled lawyer from the South
who sings “Nearer My God to Thee” as he wheels himself to
the cafeteria.

When she complains about her dinner—hot dog, creamed corn,
apple juice—he throws it in the trash and calls for Chinese
take-out:

they eat Kung-Pau chicken with chopsticks on the bed.

My grandmother loves to be outside, and so he wheels her to the
parking lot, where they ride up and down the sidewalk, his
feet on the back bar of the wheelchair, her laugh echoing into
the evening;

they stay for sunset, and the last cardinal song at dusk.

When he goes to leave, replacing his hat and taking up his coat, my
grandmother asks after me. Her face is hopeful, a little sad.

He will come to see you soon, he says.