

Teaching the Wound

Category: Poems

written by Joanne Clarkson | December 19, 2014

Joanne M. Clarkson

For LS

Assume pain, I tell them, the young, the minimum-waged, those who work the midnight shift with no chance for stars. We lean over the bed of a 93-year-old man with advanced Parkinson's disease. His face is frozen, even his eyes don't seem to move unless you watch the sheen. These

student aides are to turn him, bathe and lotion his stiffened limbs. After they roll him silent and awkward as a rug, I notice the bandage discolored with seepage, covering his left calf. The notes had not mentioned

a wound. Someone should have given him a pill, an elixir, some remedy before we started the fumbling torture of water and rag. I ring for the med nurse, emphasizing again: *Can you understand that most patients*

in this situation would be feeling pain? One is texting when he thinks I don't see. Another turns her head, fingering her hair in the mirror over the tiny sink. Another glances at the clock. Two whisper together. I can teach skills and charting aimed at avoiding termination and litigation, how to keep a

license clean, but it is next to impossible to force someone to leave their own body, crawl beneath flesh still warm beyond sense or usefulness. True pain is individual. I turn back to the bed. The girl with the basin of water that she has checked three times for temperature without

being told, the one with almost no English, rinses the cloth and parts skin folds, all the time murmuring into his silence, reassuring him, speaking his name that even I had forgotten.

About the poet:

Joanne M. Clarkson's work has appeared in [Nimrod](#), [Naugatuck River Review](#) and [The Midwest Quarterly](#); her fourth poetry collection, [Believing the Body](#), was published this year. She has master's degrees in English and library science and worked for many years as a teacher and professional librarian. After caring for her mother through a long illness, she trained as a registered nurse, specializing in hospice and community nursing. Many of her poems are inspired by her patients and their caregivers.

About the poem:

"One of my roles is to instruct caregivers, both in the home and in facilities. One of the most difficult things to teach is empathy. As the final lines of this poem reveal, those I work with often instruct me."

Poetry editors:

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