



POETRY

Patient notes

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Here's the thing. While I have my asthma under control and my sleeping is no worse than usual, I am still near the *uaigh*. That's the word for grave in Irish, and it's also part of the word for loneliness. I'm near one or the other, or both. There was a time when my health was the only thing I talked about, and my friends from that time ask me now, and I remember that that was the person I was; when health was a fear, because pain was my first language.

But what's really bothering me is the way I use the possessive when it comes to my asthma, my insomnia, my thinning hair, my symptoms. It makes me think I think I am these things. Am I? I wilt therefore I am? If they are me, where will I go if I lose them?

I remember when I learned the word ontology – the study of the nature of being. If I am sad, is sad me? If sad is me then what happens when someone treats my sadness? If we were all speaking Irish we would say that sadness is *on* me. But we're not. Because when I was five I asked where English came from and my parents introduced me to *stair*. If we all spoke Irish we would say *stair* instead of history. But we speak English, mostly, and so *stair* is relegated to something we use to get up or down, never a story. Did you know that I carry my people's history in my bones? People didn't believe me when I said that but then scientists wrote about it, and discovered what was already there – inherited in the blood, the bones, the DNA, the genomes, the chromosomes, like thinning curly hair, like weak lungs, like poetry, like insomnia – and it's all the rage now, that codified stairstory inside us.

Once when I was waiting on a trolley I kept on trying to get up even though I knew I'd fall down. So they put an orderly to mind me. Well, he was there to restrain me, but I didn't mind. He was young and eager to be seen to be good with patients. I asked him how long his shift had been and he said it was his first. After a bit of this and a bit of that he told me he wasn't sure he'd come back for a second. I said Ah Son. I said it because I felt it even though I don't have any sons. All of his need was raw in front of him. And my words, out of my mouth, were more surprising than anything else I heard that day. Turns out, I was happy to wait with him. He has tattoos all over his skin – quotes and quotes from poems. Stories written on the body, like a skinscripture.

Just like all of us.

When I asked the nurse her name she said she shouldn't tell me but she would, provided I stopped being a pain in her ass. You call me by mine, I said. And she said, I know. Then she said swallow these, try to get some sleep. If you need anything, call me. Call you what? I said. Verity, she said. I tried to believe.

Having my blood pressure taken, I noticed that the cuff was sponsored by Viagra. Nice sponsorship I said. The nurse looked down. Keeps your arm straight, she said – and then she snorted – I can't believe I said that, she said, we must know each other from another life.

Another life. Sometimes that sounds nice.

And another time, in another surgery room, a doctor noticed I was reading a book of poems by Emily Dickinson. I always hated her, the doctor said. I said that I never understand her, that's why I love her. Are you a poet? she asked. I used to be, I said. She said, Where's the poet now? I said Lost. Then she said What rhymes with Lost? I said Frost. Then I said Tossed, Provost, Accost, Crisscross, Holocaust. She looked at me. You forgot to say Cost, she said, pull up your shirt, let me listen to your heart.

On my way home, I wrote rhymes on the back of my hand with a biro I found in the bottom of my bag.

All this time and I've not told you what I do. I'm a business owner.

Ontology again. I'm a nurse. I'm a banker. I'm a shelf stacker. I'm an orderly. I'm a failure at the plans other people had for me.

Verity means truth so here's some. Sometimes, on rare occasions, I know that I am a small corner of a world that involves love and poetry and breathing and rest and friendships and late night curries made from scratch washed down with bubbles and conversation. Most of the time, I'm just a man in front of a computer trying to stay alive.

Once at a dinner, I met a man who fitted blinds. Around the table were a bishop, a poet, a teacher and the man who fitted blinds. Nobody had more light than the man who knew how to keep the light out. I don't remember his questions. I do remember his curiosity. *Ábhar le ionadh* in Irish, watching with wonder. Where did he find the wonder to watch?

Back in the waiting room. A little boy sitting next to me, with a woman next to him. Sitting with my book of poems, I feel a touch on my hand. Mister, he says, where is your pain? I look at the woman to see if she has something to say, some way of saving me from the story I don't want to tell but need to tell. The woman flushes. She opens her mouth. Then she stops. She seems to decide. She looks at me. She waits. I look at her. I look at him. Mine's in my heart he says, moving his hand from touching mine to touching his small torso. Mine too, I say, listening to the roar of my blood.

When did you last have sex? the doctor asks. Then she smiles. It's not an offer, just a question. This morning, I say, blushing. Mornings are good for love and touch, she says. Keep it up.

Treatment. Treat. Treating. Let's begin your treatment the doctor said to me. I said to him that the treatment began with the man who didn't believe in verity. I could tell you what I mean, but if you don't know, then I don't know. If you know, then I know too. Sweets for the young. Sours for the sad. Treats for some. Treat the rest.

Last story. Lie back, the doctor said. I felt his cold hands pressing my stomach. Sorry they're cold, he said. He kept pressing. When he pressed near my belt, it happened. A memory hidden in the muscle flooded me and I am

Frightened. Shocked. Spasming. Tense. Afraid. Lonely.

Something I hadn't remembered that I remembered is remembered in my body and my body is my brain now, and my body has remembered. The doctor looks at me. He knows. He has heard my body too. He is quiet. He has stopped pressing. He looks me in the eye. Would you like a glass of water? Anything, I say, Anything.

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