

Happy Hour

Chard deNiord

This is the wristwatch
telling the time
of the talkative man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

- *Elizabeth Bishop*

I stood behind the table of urinals
on evening shift, my last day on the job,
and turned this ward into a bar.
Patients glanced at me from the lounge
and almost smiled. "Listen up," I said.
"It's happy hour!
All drinks are free!"

"You're as crazy as we are," Robert said.
Nancy laughed like a chickadee.
"What'll it be?" I asked.
Rhoda was on an upswing,
walking like a penguin down the hall.
"Give me a screwdriver," she said,
"to tighten my screws."
"Comin' right up." I said.
"I'm NPO for ECT, my dear.
Better not. I'm getting
the hangover that lasts a year."

I asked Kenny if he wanted a gin and catatonic.
Not funny. Suddenly quiet.

I was at an altar now instead of a bar.
"How about a lemonade or sarsaparilla?"
He stood as still as a mannequin
against the wall and stared at something
so far away it came too close to him.

Alex stopped his pacing in front
of the bar and stared at me.
I pictured a worm devouring his brain
like so many leaves.
"I'll take a daiquiri," he said
The first thing he'd said in days.
I poured him a glass of air,
which he took and thanked me for
and drank, then handed back
the empty glass as real.

I poured one for me
and held it high. "*L'chaim*," I said,
"to all of you."
"And also to you," Rhoda chimed.
"We'll miss you, dear."

I drank as Alex did, in a single swig,
then put my goblet down on the bar
and smelled that smell that was also mine.