Thanksgiving: Visiting My Brother on the Ward

Peter Schmitt

Behind the thick, crosshatched glass of the cruiser, my brother, back for the holiday, breathes more slowly. A phalanx of uniforms cloaks the open door, murmuring to him where he sits. The carving knife is somewhere out of reach, none of us so much as scratched. Inside, the bound bird cools on the butcher block.

Later that night I move through many doors, each locking behind me, each inlaid with the same heavy glass as the squad car. Through the last I see my brother's face, fixed as on a graph, ordinate, abscissa. When he sees mine he retreats from the common room to his own, a bare cell he shares with a narrow bed.

He will not speak to me, at first. His fingers move in perpetual chafe, like a mantis, his lifelong nervous habit, the edges of a newspaper shredded on the bed. This time, his eyes say, we have betrayed him as never before. This time, he seems to say, he cannot find a way to forgive us.

At last I persuade him to join the others finishing the meal, their plastic utensils working the meat, their low voices broken by stray whoops of inappropriate laughter. We sit, though, in a separating silence, my brother's hand already eroding his napkin, eyes distant with medication.

If only he were faithful to himself and took his daily pills… But what is the point of such a constancy when the world itself has so profoundly turned away? As tonight I will leave him here, leave all of them here, the psychotics and depressives, my brother, to lie on their beds and stare at their ceilings, and I know that for at least this visit he will not come home, where our parents now sit in darkness, their faces streaked and damp. And when we drive him to the airport, an unmarked police car following as an escort, he might be a foreign dignitary bearing developments back to his country…

For now, though, it is just two brothers, beneath a glaring bulb. The expression on his face would ask, Have you gotten what you came for? And again I have no answer for him. But there, at the floor of the bed, all around the room, are crumbs of paper, as if he were leaving a trail by which he might be found.