
Opening the word hoard

Five poems by Helen Drucquer and a story by Frederick Nenner

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Touch

All the time touch, chaotic touch, unspoken and untutored sense. Touch happening every day in every room fingers in arseholes probing feeling for the lump in the gut nervous student about to put his hand on or in that soft hidden mound kindly male hand on the back of the child's head touch that he will treasure all his life and reenact one day in remembrance of that gift. gift of trust that you put your finger in my mouth and I do not bite it trust that the finger tips know pass their knowing to what is learned in the arid lab know also what has not been written but know just know in their own right as the masseur's hands know to move this way and that never arrive or leave the body without warning He touched them and they were healed.

Holding and soothing the anxious baby directing the healing movement through the arms and hands and the grandmother and I talking engaging our brains only when I become aware that in fact she is staring at the baby she is becoming aware of the baby's steady gaze I am wrapping him in peace she is becoming the baby and then we are all three in one embrace rocking and touching the sweet smell sound of the baby and we are healed as the poison in this moment at least drains away.

This building this touchstone this rough and ready family provider time absorber touching into our lives and touching out into others abuser too and abused. container of our highest ideals and our most treacherous poison as the ancient snake recalls to us its ability to kill or cure and we caress the treacherous pelt so smooth so fine so seductive of our search for purity for bright health for reason for efficiency. from the steaming pit the mess of sweat and shit bare feet cut on hidden flints and over the entrance written in writhing script the ancient words Know Thyself know my poison and my remedy know the knowledge of the finger tips do no knowing harm.

Taste

Microwaved potato and cheap tea.
Liquorice Allsorts with Peg.
Abe goes out for chocolate
On a cold winter's day

At four.
Remember the day
We shared a red pepper
In the group?
An exotic treasure
To some.

In-sight

There's a deep well in the deepest forest
Where I know not black or white.
I am still;
No ripple; so still
My breath
I *live* in the house on the hill
I work, drink, die.
What forest? What well?
What silent ripple.
I **hate** sunny horizons,
The market place.
I **hate** the glimpse
Of dark forest trees
On the edge of my dreams.
I **HATE** that child
Hiding in the dark well.
Mardy sniveller
Filthy little rat.
If I stay quiet
In my freezing pit
It will all happen
In the house on the hill,
To the hating woman
With her fears and disgust.
I am forgotten, lost; mute
With my yogic breath.
But I know swift survival—
Grab, run, swig.
Draw down stuff to my nest.
I'm a magpie, an imp;
A breaker, a poker, a tickler.
By these things you know me.
Look and I shrivel,
Touch and I'm gone.
Dare join me—I'll trance you;
But tell me
Where is the sun?

Sound

Chris said, "He sits there, monumentally depressed, suicidal, not speaking, but every time he moves his leather jacket creaks."

She said, "There's something unbelievably sexual about it."

She said, "I bumped into the family in town and instead of being his doctor, I went all silly and girly as though I had something to hide and his bloody jacket was squeaking."

I never noticed a thing. Then I forgot.

At the end of our first session, a couple of months later, I stood up to open the door and a sudden storm of creaking leather rushed into my awareness. Sexy? More like a mild form of a nail on a blackboard.

Then I forgot. From time to time over the next few months the jacket would make itself evident again and I tried to see what had caught Chris, but to no avail.

We worked hard. The marriage ended, the feared and longed for voluntary redundancy was accomplished, the university place at the the age of 45 confirmed.

Last day. We stood to say goodbye. He didn't shake my hand. We made a step towards the brief hug, the mutual squeeze on the upper arm. He said, "I'd like to take you in my arms." It was too late to do anything else. He held me like a man holds a woman and, understanding at last, I rested my cheek on the familiar jacket.

Smell

Sudden sweet smell of death

In the waiting room.

Who?

Frederick Nenner *Director, Social Work Services, Lutheran Medical Center, New York*

Nellie

Nellie won't be home for supper tonight. She died today. Her mother knows about it so she won't be worried. Instead, her heart is broken now and forever, because each day will be another day that her Nellie will not be in it.

Nine years old Nellie was on her way to school. There were only two streets to cross and she had promised her mother that she would be careful.

She had the light, he had the light. Like her mother had told her do, Nellie looked both ways. Like the driver had been taught, he looked both ways. What she didn't do was look behind when she left the curb. What he didn't do was look down from the cab of the truck when he made the right turn. He heard something but made nothing of it. After all, how much noise can a small nine year old make when she's hit by tons of metal.

The trauma doctors spent more than an hour with Nellie. She was all but dead when the ambulance brought her in but they had to try, she was so young. Each physician had been exquisitely

prepared through years of training to keep people alive when terrible events happened. All were unprepared when outcomes were poor, even when the outcome had little to do with them and all to do with what brought the patient to them in the first place. One after the other, all in green scrubs, they leave in silence.

Everyone in the hospital knows the terrible thing that has happened to this child. Only Mon Chow, Nellie's mother, who speaks only Chinese and is new to this country, has yet to be told. She is at work in a factory and the police go to bring her to us.

Nellie had left this life for more than three hours before Mon Chow knew her child never made it to school. By the time she arrives at the hospital she knew something serious had happened. It was for us to tell her that her child was dead.

We have all lost a child; we feel helpless and desperately need to feel better. And one of us speaks the words to this mother that we are all saying to ourselves. "Is there anything, anything that we can do? Just tell us, let us know." She wraps herself in her own arms, the left across her chest, the right holding onto her shoulder, face buried in the crook of her elbow. She rocks slowly back and forth, uttering a low and continuous moan. And, in her silence, we hear Mon Chow's answer; "My daughter, my Se Chen, my Nellie, I want my baby back. I Want My Baby Back! Give Me Back My Baby!"

How she knew to come I do not know. She left Nellie's classmates to be here with this child who will never know she came. Pamela Wong, young contained, speaks English with an accent. She lets us know she speaks the family's dialect. We take her to Mon Chow. They have never met and yet they have always known each other. "I am Nellie's teacher. I am here." There is no touching, no move to be close. Only a quiet: a calm, a presence. We bring her a chair. She sits next to the grieving mother. It is through her that we talk and it is through her silence that we learn that the comfort we can give is in being, not in saying, except when there is no choice.

"You know this was a terrible accident. Nellie is still here. She will look the way you remember her. We had to put a tube in her mouth to help her breathe and now we have to keep this tube in for the Medical Examiner. We need you to let us know this child is Nellie. We can show you a picture, or, we can bring you to her".

The teacher speaks to mother and then to us. "Not now. She cannot do this. She is not ready."

"And you? Then police tell us you can make the identification." No words are spoken only the nod of her head.

A small room, a lifeless form on a gurney, completely covered with a sheet. The nurse folds it back, exposing Nellie's head cradled in white. The only sign of what has happened is the tube in her mouth where the respirator was connected. We are all here in this little room with this little child who lies motionless, the teacher, principal, police sergeant and us. We ask the question that must be

answered, even though the answer is known. "Is this Nellie?" The principal answers with her tears, the teacher with a nod. The policeman writes in his black report book, "Pamela Wong, teacher of deceased, identification 11:15AM."

"The eyes, they are open." Pamela says. "There is a belief that this is a very bad thing. The soul is talking to us, letting us know that there was much suffering here. If Nellie's mother knows about this belief, it will be very hard for her." The nurse reaches for gloves knowing the answer before asking the question. "Should we close her eyes?" Again, a nod. The nurse gently closes the lids but they do not stay shut. Pamela Wong, standing next to Se Chen, places her hand on the child's forehead, moving it slowly down, closing the eyes, leaving her hand in place. "Se Chen, you can be at peace now. There is no longer anything to fear. There will be no more pain. You are safe now. It is time to close your eyes. Close your eyes for you, close your eyes for your mother. Be at peace, Se Chen. Go on your journey to peace." Her calm and steady hand moves

with the rhythm of her words, giving comfort to this child. If only she can hear it, feel it. "Sleep Se Chen, sleep."

It is time to go. Our place is no longer with this child, it is with this child's grieving mother. This morning she sent her Se Chen to school, now her child is in a white tiled room with all but her face covered by a sheet. Five hours have passed between then and now. She is ready to see her child and begin to say goodbye.

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News and notes

Second National Medical Humanities Conference

Following the success in March 2000 of the conference, *The Healing Arts : the Role of the Humanities in Medical Education*, conference organiser Deborah Kirklin, on behalf of the medical humanities unit at the Royal Free & University College Medical Schools, is planning a second national humanities conference to be held on 27th March 2001 at the National Gallery. The conference, entitled, *The Healing Environment: Without and Within*, will explore the role and importance of the environment in health. Speakers will examine the power of the physical environment, from the perspective of both architects and artists, to create health care settings

that encourage rather than inhibit flourishing. In addition the importance of the arts in the health of a community will be discussed. Finally the potential of the arts to affect the internal environment of both patients and professionals will be experienced first-hand through a series of workshops covering literature, practical art, creative writing and guided tours of selected paintings in the National Gallery. For further details of this conference and to book a place visit the conference website on-line at www.ucl.ac.uk/primecare-pops/mhu/conference.htm or call Heather Mitchell on 020 7288 3597.