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Poetry

Two Ways of Seeing a Patient

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When Mark Twain was a young boy he spent his days watching
Steamboats float down the river in the small town of Hannibal Missouri,
Dreaming of one day riding the riverway as a steamboat pilot.
Upon a boat he stepped one day and his naive, uneducated eyes saw pure magic.
Graceful curves, reflected images,
Woody heights, soft distances,
And over the whole scene, far and near,
The dissolving light drifted steadily,
Enriching it every passing moment with new marvels of coloring.
He saw beauties and charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the
river's face
He witnessed the most stunning of sunsets,
Turning the water to blood; red hue brightened into gold surface broken by boiling, tumbling
rings, painted, tinted as opal.

When one day he achieved his dream of becoming a steamboat pilot,
Able to read the river like a book.

He looked back upon the river,
and realized he had lost something.
All the grace, the beauty, the poetry were gone.
The faintest dimple on its surface, once just a dimple
At once looked hideous, grim to the pilot's eye
Dimple spelled wreck or rock buried below
The water's face

To the pilot, the sun no longer meant sunset
Sun meant wind tomorrow
The floating log no longer just driftwood
Log meant rising water.
The slanting mark of the water face no longer silent
It screamed to the pilot "reef below!"

All romance and charm of the river's face let go
Every feature spelled not beauty but information
Navigation safely was the pilot's sole purpose.

When I was a young girl I fell in love not with water
But with people.

Wanting not to sail down to trail the Mississippi
The tales of people, tales of joy, and pain and triumph, poverty
Tales of healing

Is what begged at my heart, not a man piloting from the dock
But a doc piloting a man, a patient
Patience, you know the road to becoming a doctor is longer than the Mississippi
But

I see such beauty in the human soul, resilience in the humankind, plasticity of the human mind,
Such grace in the way a baby takes her first steps,
Strength in the hands of a mother as her brother takes his last breaths
I am inspired by the chance of this profession
To create the space for these moments of expression
To find people time, or prime them for news, what to choose when medicine has nothing to offer
you?

There is such sacredness and mystery in life, lives every day
Just yesterday I saw a nurse walking a man with an IV pole
Strolling, smiling as they passed the Houston Hall
And just yesterday a woman, perhaps eighty eight
No aid, hair grayed, face intent
Focused upon her pickings of wild flowers and weeds
In a black basket, who knows where she's going
along the Schuylkill River trail...

A couple, huddled together on a bench,
Girl caressing a curly red head the boy, face distressed
Like he had something on his mind...

Rewind to the homeless man
Huddled in his tent under Market Street bridge
Abridged stay at the shelter
Sweltering heat or cold winter
I never knew which I'd prefer

They say if you change the way you look at things, the things you look at will change.

Rectify your ears, the way you hear
and the way you speak, can you repeat that word?
Medi-cali-zation
Sound it out now.

“the process by which human conditions and problems come to be defined and treated as medical
conditions.”

Medicalization.

I've begun to accept this new language
Of medicine,
Where fever and sweats
Becomes hyperpyrexia and diaphoresis
And where a PERRL refers not to the sea's precious gem
But to pupillary examinations.

But as the person right in front of you is
Lost behind computer screens, teams trying the nail the diagnosis
Know this:

Most mornings, I wish I could change the things I see in the world,
But never the way I see the world
The way I see people
As people not problems atomized, stories
Bound neatly into plotted lines
And Kaplan Meier curves.
Predictable endings, attendings neutral
To the brutal and blinded to the beauty.

You see, I don't want the eyes of a steamboat pilot,
Gazing upon the river's face.
There are two views of every patient...
Tell me, doc, what do you see?

With inspiration from:

Twain, Mark. "Two Ways of Seeing a River." Life on the Mississippi. James R. Osgood and Company, 1883.
