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Harlem Valley Psychiatric Center

One needs to be a little lost to find it
on a Dutchess County knoll. Building 85
still stands. Look it up. Or better, go yourself.
Its lower story windows broken, boarded,
but the other thirteen floors appear intact enough
to taunt the empty village outside its gates
with State employment. Our lives, that “campus”
and my journeying, have crossed: first as a child,
and later as a doctor who made some kinds of work done there
my habit, my profession, and today, when heading home
from Danbury in the snow, with no one quite expecting me.
I turned off at Wingdale, followed ditches lined with cow vetch
dropping on the downside of a sudden rise. There:
bakery, laundry, low-slung dorms, brick housing
for unlicensed pharmacists, a minor stadium, and, hidden
in the trees, burial ground with rotting gate and lettered arch—
patients abandoned to the place—every inch dissolving,
stripped of flashing, grizzling with mineral ooze.
And over it all, like speaking eye, the glass high-rise, lobotomy
suite, insulin tubs and narrow beds for the electrically changed.
As my father was, strapped down in ’74,
having been there months and shrugging his way
beneath the gaping fence. He told us once he was tired
of trading cigarettes for whiskey in the tunnel
between the dorms, where sex was sold, and coke
and heroin. Said he’d aimed for Armonk, IBM’s *mainframe*
where he’d been a salesman, been okay, planned to show up
like Santa in a limo, got as far as Ureles Liquor, collapsed
beside the tracks, was brought back in, sent upstairs.
No wonder he made us stay at the sticky picnic table
in the shade when my mother took us there to see him.
No wonder he was afraid to look the orderlies in the eye,
or so I remember seeing, though it may be
I imagined what I saw, eyes alive with what he didn’t tell,
what I felt and what I’ve tried to know so well
it would unknow itself, unwind to nothing, disappear,
why I am unprepared for this cold fear
and rage—could I tear that grim museum
off the map, would that tear him, tear me in two—
no child should ever be there, or have been, no one.