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The Devil Overhead

By Tulsi Patel

You—an elderly bedbound woman in a nursing home.
I—a student.
When we first met
you were shaking, screaming at the Devil
flying around the room and over our heads.
You tell me to duck before the Devil knocks me down,
I tell you
   I don't see anything,
   I don't think anything is circling above us,
   I think we'll be okay
in an attempt to soothe you.

Dementia, the nurses explain. Hallucinations, the nurses say.
What do I say the next time to help you feel safe?
I reflect
on the communication strategies I've been taught
what I'm hearing is that…
I can understand why you would feel this way…
may I offer a differing opinion…
I excavated my mind for more words
and was faced with their inadequacy.

I think,
Maybe it's not so much about the precise words
as much as the presence and attention I offer,
the validation:
   Who am I
     to tell you
       what your reality is
        and isn't?

And so instead
Of trying to pull you up into reality, ripping you away from your imaginative world
With a rope that's lead heavy and understands gravity too well,
I stop pulling the rope.
I cast away my logic and
decide to step – or fall, really – into your reality with you.
I stop denying whatever you see — some days the Devil, others your Aunt—

but I have become an expert distractor:
On better days, as fellow bird enthusiasts we speak of the Kererus, Hoopoes, Golden
Pheasants
I recite the Bible to you, a devout Christian
and then Mary Oliver.
I get better and better at varying the intonation of my voice to keep you engaged.

I challenge my urge
to pathologize and reduce you to the victim of your disease…
In doing so I'm finally able to see more parts of the
Entirety of you.

But there's so much I still want to know
Did you have a pair of lucky socks growing up?
Who was your best friend?
because I know that to you, your brain isn't diseased and your mind isn't ill—
it's just your Normal Daily Life.

You—a thoughtful, kind, optimistic elderly bedbound woman in a nursing home who loves
birds and religion and poetry and much, much more.
I — a person curious about you, wanting to bear witness.

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