

Empathy

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I met the limit of empathy
long after one bleary day,
when light opaquely let itself in
the ICU's ten inch-
wide window and from which
one can only see a brick wall.

The bays were rounded in
a half-ring. Pain
cut back, for now, with
stomach injections, respirators,
and Ativan. "No one came to see me,"
he said, wet and blinking.

That year his psychiatrist came around
once every month and a half—
a fellowship at Harvard, then at McLean.
The hospitalists were many though:
after every admission,
they were different every day.

I met the limit of empathy in the limit
of language to talk about comorbidities,
bound up in an other's drinking:
to agonal breathing,
to unconsciousness,
and debility.

Do you remember us?
We've been to this unit thirteen times
since September. We called the police.
Clinically, each time
you want a verbal affirmation—
"Do you feel you want to die?"

I met the limit of empathy
in the in-ability to gauge
the interpretive threshold
of suicidality,
in slow,
mute death.

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