

"Words' Worth" Poetry Readings

Poets at the Culture, Arts, and Parks Committee of the Seattle City Council.

The Black Rhinoceros by Scott Driscoll

Smoke hangs in a blue-layered fog above her bed, beyond the fan's reach. A stack of videos from the library bookmobile -- all Wild Kingdom -- has toppled into the bowl of goulash. Her bed is her world, and it's a mess. She won't look at me. She blows the smoke toward the open window. I'm inclined to apologize for snapping at her over the phone when she woke me up, but the smell in her bedroom, a noisome melange of sour sweat, spoiled food and dead ashes, holds me back.

"Do you realize it's two o'clock in the morning?" I say. I had to kiss my daughter awake and tell her to call me at Marion's if the squirrels frightened her again, and to please not call her mom. There was no need to give her mother ammunition for a new hearing.

Marion takes a drag on her brown More cigarette. "I don't give a damn what time it is," she says. "I want those pills. Tonight." She turns and studies me humorlessly. Her hair, set earlier today by the visiting nurse when she stopped in to replace the morphine patches, has fallen into disarray of pewter spikes that sag limply into the pillow. The morphine undoes everything. Even her eyes, her most striking feature, bold oval instruments of surveillance, have sunk into the hooded shadows of her skull and taken on a feverish glaze.

"You seeing things again?" We do the pill routine every time she gets fresh morphine patches, which give her terrible hallucinations. Last time she swore she was on a ship. Every one of her men were there, including Tommy, the son she hasn't seen or talked to in seventeen years.

Her visiting nurse and occasional cook, Kasia, a tall martinet from Poland, keeps the meds high on a shelf out of Marion's reach. A chart tracks what she takes. It's quite an assortment. Three kinds of morphine. Zolof for elevating moods. Nortriptyline to help her sleep. Ibuprofen for swollen joints. Doss to soften stools. Digoxin to slow her hammering heart. Kasia won't administer a lethal dose.

"Put on Three Tenors in Concert. Hungry? Of course you are. You were born hungry. You can finish my goulash."

"Do you know how much trouble I can get into over this?"

"See. This is what I'm telling you. It's always about me me me. That's how come you're alone in that damn bunker and I can't get any peace before I die"

"Marion." Why am I always defending myself to her? "I moved my files into the garage so I could write briefs at home and wait for the school bus. You know very well that's what turned the trick at the hearing."

"I know damn well what turned the trick was me. And I say Queenie can be alone for five minutes."

"I need to be home when Queenie gets off the bus. The counselor said the afternoons are the worst time. You know that. That's when teens get in trouble."

"You're too easy on her. Her mom's right about that. Letting her wear dog collars."

"Don't go there, Marion."

"Go home to Queenie. I'll get them out of someone else."

(For more of Scott's writings, visit www.contextbooks.com on the Web)

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