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poems
by
doctors

Shrink

Tricia Henry

She who would never leave the house without looking neat,
who I never saw in her utility underwear,
was taken into care wearing a slip in the winter street.
She was shoeless and asking for me door-to-door.

Respite. Six-week evaluation. I packed for her
for the short stay, rummaging through pants and bras.
Clothes neatly folded, colour-coded, drawer-to-drawer.
One small case was all. She asked me, "How long for?"

She stood diminished in a Home with a sea view.
Shrivelled inches in height, fragile as glass.
Her things were marked indelibly. We did it new
every week; her clothes shrank in the wash.

Clothes that didn't shrink she didn't recognise as hers,
the labels even less since they used her real name.
Six weeks, then three months, she changed gears.
I adjusted with her but didn't know who she became.

When she went to a locked ward she stopped asking for me.
She let her mind contract. Time for me to clear
her home of all her household icons. By degrees
her character was bleached, she began to disappear.

I found hung up among her "special dresses" (all dry-cleaned
and ready to wear) his trilby hat and sheepskin fur.
That smell that never leaves a coat, of smoke, of body,
after-shave. Suddenly I, too, felt he was there.

And I pictured her recalling winters when he'd worn
that coat, needing the texture of it to re-invent
him, to keep her grounded and in the right dimension.
I held its full length against me, warm, redolent.

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