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## Forced Marches

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## *Forced Marches*

1

Margaret refuses to go a step further.  
"This is wrong," she says, suspecting the hall,  
the whuush of wheels, the lone  
cane tapping. I coax her with passing faces,  
the blind woman who never stops moving  
an inch at a time  
tugging the wall rail  
marooned at open doorways  
she rocks her chair, her  
almost weightless body,  
forward, pumping  
the swing until someone  
helps her: keep moving or die.  
There is nothing to say—  
she has counted the last mourner  
leaving the funeral.

2

One man—genetically cheerful—calls out, beams  
and converses. "Winter," he says. Or, "Spring,"  
glad to take the place of the turtle, sitting  
down to bear the weight on his shoulders.

3

The nurse says  
Margaret—86 pounds, nearly blind  
with cancer—swims every Tuesday.  
And the water takes her  
gently as a spent camellia,  
a foundering wing.

4

"We need to go back," says Margaret and remembers  
to trust me. We find the room where families wait  
to pay a visit. The woman with crayons  
has drawn a portrait—bold gestures, stick  
arms and legs, a childish body disappearing  
inside the head. A kind of petition.

5

Going back, we can all walk a little.  
Near the door, a catholic

crosses Christ's chest and forehead—  
surely forgiven. When we greet the retired doctor  
struck with palsy  
or lightning, his quaking arm held up  
is erasing unspeakable words.

6

God protect us  
from the lobby, so many slumped at the wheel, still  
believing God will take them.

But no one takes them  
not even into the moonlight, into the circle of angels  
who rise, who try to shake the salt from their feathers.

*Carolyn Reynolds Miller*