Forced Marches

Carolyn Reynolds Miller
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1
Margaret refuses to go a step further.
“This is wrong,” she says, suspecting the hall,
the whush 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
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.

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