Letters from an Institution

[Letters from an Institution](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178307#poem)

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Letters from an Institution

The ward beds float like ghost ships

in the darkness, the nightlight

above my bed I pretend is a lighthouse

with a little man inside who wears

a sailor cap and tells good old stories

of the sea. The little man is me.

Perhaps I have a dog called Old Salt

who laps my hand and runs endlessly

down the circular stairs.

Perhaps he bites like sin.

I dream of ships smashing the reefs,

their bottoms gutting out,

the crews’ disembodied voices screaming

Help us help us help somebody please

and there is no one there at all

not even me. I wake up nervous,

Old Salt gnawing my flesh. I wake up nervous,

canvas bedstraps cutting my groin.

The night nurse, making the rounds,

says I bellow in sleep like a foghorn.

\*

Nothing moves at night

except small animals

kept caged downstairs

for experiments, going

bullshit, and the Creole

janitor’s broom whisking

closer by inches.

In the ward, we all

have room for errors and elbows

to flail at excitement.

We’re right above the morgue;

the iceboxes make our floor

cold. The animals seem to know

when someone, bored with holding

on, gives out: they beat

their heads and teeth

against the chicken wire

doors, scream and claw

The janitor also knows.

He props his heavy broom

against his belt, makes

a sign over himself

learned from a Cajun,

leaves us shaking

in our bedstraps

to drag the still

warm and nervous body

down from Isolation.

\*

I have a garden in my brain

shaped like a maze

I lose myself

in, it seems. They only look for me

sometimes. I don’t like my dreams.

The nurses quarrel over where I am

hiding. I hear from inside

a bush. One is crisp

and cuts; one pinches. I’d like to push

them each somewhere.

They both think it’s funny

here. The laughter sounds like diesels.

I won’t come out because I’m lazy.

You start to like the needles.

You start to want to crazy.

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