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## poem

### Careful

Kathleen M. Kelley

There is a man I almost know,  
an orderly in green scrubs I see  
in the elevator, pass in the halls  
at the hospital where we are careful  
to look down, knowing our patients  
deserve their privacy, and we are strangers.

Elevators are full of strangers.  
They see without even looking and know  
more than you'd think about the patients  
on gurneys. The door opens. I look to see  
who's getting off, and it's him, being careful  
with his gurney as it takes the bump into halls

where everyone is in a hurry, uneven halls  
clumsily connected, painted by strangers  
in colors that sicken. Always, he is careful  
with the bumps, I've been behind him, know  
the set of his shoulders, his grey pony tail. I see  
some others who transport patients

with tumors or wounds or dementia, patients  
who are helpless, but leave them in the halls  
alone while they hurry off on break to see  
if the coffee's ready yet. Professional strangers,  
we avert our eyes because we know  
too much about the system's failures. Careful

about privacy means we protect our own, careful  
to forget that sometimes we are the patients.  
We all take a turn being human, should know  
better than to walk along these halls  
as if we shared nothing with the strangers  
we take care of, like the ones I'm here to see

today, who carry code words I never like to see:  
metastatic, bipolar, morbidly obese. 'Careful,'  
what's implied. Extraordinary strangers  
often, for I have much in common with my patients,  
whose bedsides can remind me of familial halls  
that bore the exact same misery. Good thing I know

enough as I start to chart on patients  
who would all rather be cured than healed, to be careful  
not to write about everything I know.

Kathleen M. Kelley is a social worker. The poem was selected by Femi Oyeboode.  
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