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The Chant
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Donna Prinzmetal

THE CHANT

When I take my sister to the mental hospital, my daughter wants to touch the water in the fountain. My sister carries the big black suitcase and I push the stroller while holding the smaller brown one with the two black tennis shoes sticking out. My sister walks as if the burden is unbearable, and of course it is; her legs and back are wracked with withdrawal pains. Today she couldn't stand it, called the doctor and got a bottle of cough syrup, as if that would help.

When I take my sister to the mental hospital, I am reminded of all the other times. In the car she cries so hard the words blur together like headlights on the highway. "I can't, I can't. I just don't know if I can do this anymore. I owe the doctor...", more tears, then "He just keeps seeing me. I don't know how he got me in this time; insurance won't pay, oh god." And my daughter keeps saying "hi" to her over and over like a chant, "hi Jan, hi Jan, hi." When I look back at her, her eyes are fogged over as if she is drugged, as if we have all been on heroin, as if we all want to die just being with her. Hi Jan. Hi Jan.

When I drive my sister to the mental hospital, I keep thinking of the time she broke the mirror and carved trees up her arms. The paramedics had taken her by the time we got there, but we didn't know and there was so much blood and broken glass. We looked for the body for an hour before we found out she was already at the hospital, alive. The scars bleached her skin white and she wore the ghost of jagged glass, the branches of death climbing her, until a few years ago when all her skin lost its pigment, turned white and her hair grew a white tail and I couldn't touch her any more. I wanted to know what she saw in that mirror before she broke it and used the pieces on herself,

and what about the way she cut herself, not just the wrists but the long sweeping strokes to each arm. Did she cut out all the needle marks? Did she think she could cut out the hunger?

Last year she flew into a manic fire, raging out into the street where she stripped down to that blanched skin, lay on the sidewalk naked, clawing her legs and vagina right when the ambulance came. When that happened, my daughter was there. Jan almost pulled her into the street and when she endangered my daughter I swore my heart was closed to her forever. And still I drove her to the hospital tonight, tried to decipher the garbled words. "I'm so tired Donna" and Elizabeth with the chant of "Hi Hi Hi Hi Jan" and me with my own chant. How is it her and not me. Her and not me, her and not me, her and not me.

When I take my sister to the mental hospital, my daughter asks for a drink of water, and I have never wanted to give her anything so badly. Instead, as we are walking, I stroke her long curly hair while I listen to my sister. "I don't know if I'm going to make it this time" and I don't know either so I say, simply "I hope you do" and what can I say to someone who has spent her life dying. I have hated her and loved her and endured her drugs and her suicides and her storms most of my life and now all I can say is "I hope you make it," but do I?

I take my sister, again I take my sister, always I take my sister to the mental hospital and this time I have my daughter with me. We give her her suitcases and put her on the elevator like you might put someone on a train. I watch the doors close and I wait and watch the numbers light up to three as if I am waiting for her to arrive somewhere.

I take my daughter out to the fountain and she wants to kiss the water, wants to dip her hands and feet in it. In the middle of winter I want us both to bathe in the fountain outside the mental hospital, baptize ourselves in the moonlight. On the way home I still feel the emptiness in the car where she sat, empty. My

daughter says "Jan is sad" and then the tears come to me.

I take my sister to the mental hospital because it is her and not
me-her and not me-her and not me-not me-not me-not me.