

Face Up by Robert Burton

In my office
A new consultation arrives
Reeking of attitude
In his crisp custom shirt, gold cuff links, tasseled loafers.

My least favorite kind of person,
Yet I rise, shake his hand
And fill the room with the cheap pleasantries
Of medical seduction.

In the consultation room
The patient and I
Jockey for position,
Work out the subtle signals of hierarchy.

Not so in the examining room,
The patient flat on his back in an institutional blue paper gown,
While I loom overhead,
Inches from overt decay—
Skin tags, pre-historic toe nails and spidery veins—
And whatever might soon be discovered.
His smile of superiority,
Unable to withstand gravity,
Falls helplessly to the sides
Of a face filled with hair-trigger dread.

Join me at the foot of the examining table,
Look down at vulnerable bodies
Face to face with the immediacy of fate.
Observe the dissolution of defenses and pretenses,
The irrelevance of self.

This is the moment that
Binds us together
In a common destiny,
The moment through which
We all must pass.

If you want to understand others,
Do not engage them at eye level.
See them flat on their backs,
Faces up,
Defenses down.
This is the view of raw humanity

That can heal differences.

Better yet,
See both of you together on the table,
Side by side,
Not talking,
Simply waiting.
Feel afraid for both of you,
For all of us.

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