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Western

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Western

I was four,
holed up
in a hospital
full of nuns,
when I watched
my first man die.

That was after
the redheaded doc
smiled over his bowtie
and slipped me a mickey
in my Seven-Up.

While I was out
they put steel rods
like antennas in my arm
and set it in a plaster cast
the second time that year.

I came to in a room
white as clouds,
and what I saw
between the bars
of the crib beside mine

was a little fella
wrapped in flannel
with tubes sticking in him.
He didn’t cry at all
in our days and nights
together.

*
Later they rolled me
across the wide tile
of the hall to a room
with lath-and-plaster walls
painted surgery-green
and dark-stained woodwork
around high windows.

In the next bed lay a quiet man,
younger than my daddy,
who rested his head
in the crook of one arm
and spat tobacco into a can,

and listened to the stories
of the old man in the bed in front of me
who looked like my grandpa
missing a leg,
who chewed and spat
into his own can.

I had a few toys in my bed,
and my folks visited
when they could.
I got my shots,
and the days passed
in the drone of an old man's voice
and the clink of spit on tin.

* 

One day
after a night I bawled,
a starched young nun
came to tell me her story:
Once upon a time
she was so sad
she cried
the Missouri River.

Her story helped.
I passed the time
wondering what a river was,
and why one had a special name.

One day the old man dressed to leave
in white shirt and suspenders,
one leg of his church pants pinned up,
no tie and his hat square on the bed.

When a nurse came in
and told him he might as well sit,
he waved her off and said, *I'll be fine*,
then lost his hold on the bedpost
and fell headlong into the high light
of those old windows,
spasmed, vomited and was still
beside a too-late basin
before a kneeling nun.

* 

I was running a green tractor
up and down my cast,
and I saw it all,
and I didn't cry out
and I didn't bawl.

It's an old story.
I finished my time in that room.
My left arm's not much good since,
and I prefer horses
to tractors of any color.