

The Soul's Pulse

Angelo J. Cangialosi

Illness is an ordeal that transcends a struggle for physical health; it is an emotionally and mentally painful process that can elucidate the patient's identity, dissolve a former lifestyle, and crumble any connection to the outside world. In the chapter "A Visit with Bill" from his memoir *Heaven's Coast*, Mark Doty illustrates through diction and imagery one man's struggle to reconstruct the remnants of both his lover's identity and his lover's connection to a life outside the hospital room, a life free of sickness and pain.

Doty explores this multifaceted conflict by creating separate and conflicting worlds of Bill's room and the hospital. First, Doty examines the Shattuck Chronic Care Hospital, a healthcare facility that caters to terminally ill patients, a space with an "aura of abandonment" and a feeling "of the end of the road" (86). This diction evokes a sense of ostracism and reveals that society has the capacity to place terminally ill patients in "alternative" hospices—underprivileged long-term health-care facilities where a patient's dilapidated health never improves and, at best, is sustained (87). This very sense of abandonment is revealed when Doty notes that Bill's "insurance can't pay for this kind of stay in a regular hospital, where in fact they don't want him anyway;" signifying a spatial separation between "regular" society and the community of the terminally ill (87).

Also, there is a metaphysical aspect to this ostracism, as the Shattuck Chronic Care Hospital encapsulates the fading identities of these patients, eliminating their threat to society's constructs of normalcy and security. Doty's suggestion that the doors of private rooms be inscribed with the names "Shame, Suffering, Neglect, Nobody-Cares-Where-I-Am," illustrates the withered identities of these patients, and the reduction of their individualities to raw emotions

of abandonment and humility (86). Additionally, Doty supplements the separation between patient and society by using vivid imagery to both describe the hospital and refute its auxiliary role in health care. According to Doty, the hospital is a “precinct of hell” that hosts the patient's indomitable struggle against anguish and solitariness (87). This “desolate” battleground is perceived by Doty as a site of death, a place where the terminally ill have been assigned to witness their health and identity incinerate in an “inferno” of loneliness (87).

In sharp contrast to the invasive and merciless world encapsulated by the hospital, Doty depicts Bill's room as a “revelation” of love and companionship (87). At first Doty hesitates to enter into this unfamiliar domain, but then is “drawn” into the room by Phil, Bill's lover, signifying the separation of these two markedly distinct spaces. In Bill's room various ornaments allow Bill to be “so fully himself, himself all the way to the edges,” suggesting that Bill, unlike other terminally ill patients, still retains his identity to the utmost limit where his externalized persona comes into contact with others around him, even while on the border of life and death (88). Upon entering the room, Doty is relieved to find that “Bill is unmistakably himself now, a gracious host even here” (88). Doty's repetitive use of the word “here” when describing Bill's room denotes the metaphysical detachment between it and the hospital, and the irony that while they are physically close, they are spiritually far apart.

Furthermore, Doty uses subtle imagery to contrast the comfort of Bill's room with the apathy and sterility of the hospital. As opposed to the “moon-wash of institutional light” of the hospital corridor that strips its patients of intimacy, Bill's room is bathed in “warm” light “whose glow is filtered through figured silk,” illustrating that Bill occupies this space in both a physical and metaphysical sense; everything in this room resonates with Bill's essence and is seen, literally and figuratively, through Bill's light. In this room, “redolent of warmth and human

habitation,” Bill's own identity is externalized and extends to the room's physical limits: the walls, floor, door and ceiling contain Bill's authentic character, creating an intimate experience during Doty's visit with Bill (88). Thus, through the juxtaposition of these two spaces, Doty exposes the enlightening effects of love and intimacy in the face of abandonment and reduction.

Through diction and imagery, Mark Doty creates two contrasting worlds that depict Phil's selfless attempt to preserve Bill's identity and create a comfortable place where Bill can live out his final days. "A Visit with Bill" conveys the importance of maintaining identity in the face of illness, and the importance of connecting the patient to life outside the hospital. This chapter portrays identity as the soul's pulse, telling us that we are submersed in our lives, living to the very edge.

Works Cited

Doty, Mark. *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996.