
POETRY | SPRING 2023

The Softest Cloth

By Joanne Clarkson

The day I shadowed you, learning
Home Hospice nursing, you warned me,
on the drive to his cabin, about the patient
dying of throat cancer whose disease
progressed upwards, disfiguring
his speech and features.

His door was unlocked. You entered
like a friend. Laid out supplies
as if for a morning shave.
His eyes spoke what his lips could not.
He loved you for seeing more than a wound.

I waited at the corner of his vision,
handing you irrigation solution, powders
to erase odor, a roll of the softest
packing cloth. You chatted about weather,
praised the beauty of his woodland acre

then scaled pain no number could ever
describe, increasing dosages meant
for dreaming. As goodbye, you smoothed
sheeted over bones, then gently touched
his forehead, your fingers tracing shadows
of all a face can mean.

Joanne Clarkson is a poet whose sixth poetry collection, "Hospice House," was released by MoonPath Press in 2023. Her poems have been published in such journals as Poetry Northwest, The Healing Muse, Examined Life Journal, American Journal of Nursing and Beloit Poetry Journal. She has received an Artist Trust Grant and an NEH grant to teach poetry in rural libraries. Clarkson has Masters Degrees in English and Library Science, has taught and worked for many years as a professional librarian. After caring for her mother through a long illness, she re-careered as a Registered Nurse working in Home Health and Hospice.