

"One has often wondered at the fact that the central theme of the Christian gospel is love; yet though mental illness is a sphere of human life where there is a greater need for such love than in almost any other, so little is shown. [David Enoch, Psychiatrist - 'One in a Hundred.' Third Way June 1990. page 25]

Psychiatric Acute Ward

By Philippa Baker-Short

Gentlest of all societies:
The silent fellowship
of those bound together by minds
burst into brokenness
by the measure of life's pain

some striding, striding, striding,
trying to out-pace
the demons that torment them;
others shuffling
empty-eyed
all hope vacated
in the struggle they have lost;
yet all exquisitely choreographed
by shared compassion:
none with the strength
to take a burden
other than their own;
yet each move measured
by the courtesy of love
lest a rash or ill-judged step
should overturn
the agonising balance
of someone else's pain.

Few words are spoken,
few words needed;
each knows
the other has no strength
for sharing stories.

And yet the silent air
is articulate
with the language
of shared glances;
the glances
that those appointed to our care
deny us,
afraid of our eyes
and all the pain they hold.
But we have no such fear.
Other eyes
can show us nothing
that we have not found already
in the depth of our own souls.

And so
as wounds burst open
spurting fourth their crimson issue
of rage or desolation
we bathe each other's agony
with looks of recognition
And when those who should know better
walk unmoved
or rebuke us for our bleeding
we keep each other's hope alive:
as murmurs and glances
are bread and wine
Viaticum for broken spirits,
in the deep communion
of those who only know

Philippa Baker-Short is currently studying Divinity
at Aberdeen University