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Poems
by
doctors

Nightwatch, 1842

Tom Pow

When night falls and all others
have resigned their trust, I walk
the galleries, the guardian,
the master of all that stalks
their fitful sleep. I inquire
into all complaints, gratify
all reasonable desires.
I compel those with angry
and turbulent passions
to follow healthier trains
of thought. I give due ballast
to the most frivolous claims –
become master of reason
when I've need to flatter
the restless and the noisy:
"What spikes your night are pictures,"
I tell them. One's convinced
that shadows cut her like knives,
another dreams she's beset
by gangs of wizards and thieves.
To those who sing or whistle
or laugh; or to one who struts
the long gallery and chants,
"Dirty slut, dirty slut, slut . . ."
I'll bring the required balm.
The somnambulist I'll lead
back to bed like a child;
while to her who cries for "Auld
Auntie Peggy", my soft step
nears like a loved one,
giving fresh hope and healing
to her troubled mind. No sound
soils the night that can't be traced
back to its primary source.
from their soliloquies, songs
and prayers, I chart the course
of that wayward black river
whose stream's one moment chocked
by rock and, at the next, split
in shallows featureless as smoke.
In the solitude of midnight
I notate such fractured plots.
When day commands the gallery,
another will take my watch.

From *Dear Alice – Narratives of Madness* (Salt, 2008). We have also published two other poems by Tom Pow, *The Great Asylums of Scotland* and *The Last Vision of Angus McKay*. Reproduced with permission from Salt Publishing Limited. © Tom Pow.

Chosen by Femi Oyeboode.

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