

## SOCIAL WORK

"If you'd like to speak to someone  
About his condition—his  
Situation—"  
Said the very pretty nurse as I emerged  
From the aseptic room, "There's a social worker. I think  
She can see you now.

"Oh—"  
She added, smiling  
At my awkwardness, "you can put  
The booties  
And gown in this bin. The gloves and mask  
Go over here, in the trash."

The very pretty  
Nurse returned to her paperwork behind the efficient  
Octagonal  
Desk, each side facing a window that displayed  
A patient prone upon  
A sterile bed  
And breathing  
Only with the muted mechanical wheeze  
Of a ventilator. As I removed  
My soft-shelled  
Carapace, placing each fouled item in its proper  
Receptacle, I asked her  
If she'd been taking care of him  
Since he arrived—had she  
Been his nurse  
The whole time?

"Your friend?" she said, looking  
Up from her chart. "Yes. He's been here  
Quite a long time now.  
He's a doll, except when he—when we try—  
But the social worker  
Can tell you  
All about that. The consulting room  
Is just down that little

Corridor, second  
Door to the left. The social worker said  
She'd meet you  
There."

The social worker was setting up temporary  
Shop in the small office—  
Just four walls  
And a desk  
With a chair on either side. "I'm so glad  
You came to visit William,"  
She said, pulling  
A thick stack  
Of files from her briefcase and offering me  
The chair with arms. "You're only  
The second  
Visitor he's had. The nurse  
Tells me  
You didn't know where he was."

No one knew, I said, and then explained  
That I meant no one  
In the neighborhood. "Of course," she said.  
"And how long  
Have  
You known William?"

"Only six weeks," I told her.

"Six weeks?" she said, her eyes becoming wary.  
"You understand  
That he's...?"

"Of course," I said, embarrassed. "That's right. I meant  
I only knew him  
For six weeks. I first met him  
Three months ago—but he's been missing  
For half  
That time."

## AN EXACT REPLICA

Oddly enough, I was the one  
In the hospital—this same  
Hospital, Mother Seton—three months ago, when my new  
Neighbor  
Moved in. A shopping cart  
Had come careening  
Down a hilly side street, entering the intersection  
A second or two  
Before  
I did. No grocery store in the vicinity, but *there*  
*It was*: I swerved to avoid it, swerved  
Again to miss  
The kid  
On the bike, the one who always shows up on cue  
In these situations, and then a convenient  
Street lamp  
Stepped forward to prevent  
Any further swerving. The heavy concrete  
Pillar absorbed  
My car's momentum, and the seat belt  
Absorbed mine.  
Which interior object  
Gave my knee  
A sound rap has yet to be determined. I "walked away  
From the accident," as they say,  
But as I stood  
Talking to the police, demanding that the runaway cart  
Be ticketed  
For attempting to leave the scene—  
Post-traumatic  
Humor which left the cops  
Strangely unamused—my right leg collapsed  
And I crumpled  
To the pavement. The patella  
Is a small bone, but as I learned in that moment, a leg  
Is largely  
Useless without one: no kneecap,  
No walking.