

# True North

Mary Dowd, MD

Men at the jail  
come in three varieties:  
lost boys,  
cool dudes,  
old wrecks

The lost boys  
have just awoken  
from their trance  
of heroin or coke,  
or alcohol and oxy's

Their hair is tousled  
or sticks straight up  
they can't quite catch on  
to where they are  
or what they've done

They want to know  
how long they've got  
so they can get their sh-- together,  
straighten out  
before they're gone at 28 or 30

And each time they come back  
I tell them that they're fine,  
their liver will recover  
if only they'll stop  
drinking, drugging, dying

The cool dudes  
range from 25 to 40  
blue eyes, white teeth,  
well groomed, well muscled  
even charming

Backs straight,  
 chests out  
they swagger,  
kings of pod 2b,  
they've always got an angle

The wrecks  
slouch into medical  
leading with their paunch,  
they have diabetes, heart disease  
cirrhosis and ascites

Off the juice  
they're sad or angry  
or encephalopathic  
truly believing this time  
they'll be ready for rehab and a job

And the lost boys  
don't see,  
what the cool dudes  
don't believe,  
that the path

from boy  
to dude  
to wreck  
proceeds relentless  
unswerving,

true as a magnet to the pole,  
in one unbroken line ❖



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## In the Pod

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The door clangs shut.  
All eyes turn toward the diversion.  
The nurse and I walk in,  
two little female sticks,  
bobbing in a sea of men.

The room is large, but small,  
dimly lit, swarming  
with elbows, feet, faces  
dozens of men  
in orange scrubs  
talking, joking  
shoving, pushing  
pacing, roaming.

The ceiling is high, but low,  
from two tiers up  
it presses down on me,  
filled with a gray-brown cloud,  
invisible,  
of something nameless,  
edgy, hostile  
and immeasurably sad.

I feel the stares  
of men looking,  
and not looking at me  
wanting contact, conversation,  
attention, sympathy,  
distraction,  
anything,  
anything at all  
Wanting,  
so much wanting  
I feel it pressing in  
squeezing me  
bruising me like thumbprints,  
collapsing me.

I shut down all my doors and windows  
and focus on a spot across the room  
where a thin bar of sunlight  
filters through barbed wire  
to light a concrete court. ❖