

## Three Poems · *Mary Swander*

### PEELINGS

Sister, pull the curtain.  
No, not for the bedpan,  
but to scoot your chair closer.  
You've been so good, here everyday,  
I hesitate to ask more, but tonight the question  
plays over and over: how much longer?  
Oh, wouldn't it be nice to be in our little house  
in Vence where we open the windows out to the meadow  
filled with poppies and tangerine trees? Orange.  
I lie hour after hour, staring at the lightbulb  
in that lamp over the bed, then everything seems rimmed  
in peelings—the intercom, the nurses' caps, the strings  
that tie this gown around my neck. I'm encased in  
this room and if I could pull away the rind of this illness,  
it's been so long, I wonder what might be left underneath.  
My skin. No one can understand the pain of being touched.  
Or not. The problem: not even a rash to show the staff  
bustling in at 6 A.M. Disappointing, I'm sure, for the interns.  
And difficult for any visitor to believe that I'm not  
just grieving for some lost love I met last summer  
on the beach. But when anything—object, cloth,  
or hand—comes in contact, the beehive stirs,  
then stings from my hairline down to my toes.  
For months, you know, I slept in my clothes,  
the thought of a dress brushing over my back too much.  
The buzzing began in my ears even before I'd lie down,  
then it'd come of its own with each toss or turn.  
I'd wake up burning. The flames rising.  
This little bell became my trail to the outside world.  
Remember that trip to Tibet when we bought it  
at the monastery, the monks' chants echoing down the valley?  
I'd ring and you'd come to calm my screams and bring

a glass of water. We had no idea what was the matter, and all the money Mother and Father left us couldn't find a cause or cure. "Normal. Nothing unusual shows up here. We could do further tests, but I suggest you go home, rest, and try to eliminate stress."

Bells of Chartres, the Seville Cathedral,  
Bell of St. Patrick's Will, harness bells  
tinkling through the Moscow snow. I'd imagine myself wrapped in a blanket of ice and dream of those monks controlling their body temperature by breathing.

On the freezing mountain tops. Out, in.

I became a buoy at sea and most steered clear, not knowing what to do, to say, thinking all along I must be cracked. But we kept searching and, you, my dear, never let me drift. We tried a dry climate and moved to the Texas desert, but there the bees became scorpions and brown recluse spiders eating holes through my pores. Here, the doctors are trying to dig down and uncover the seed of the problem and have a hunch it may be in my own mouth: mercury poisoning from the dental amalgam. Tomorrow all my fillings will be replaced with porcelain. My tongue moves from side to side tolling the hours until it's time, while outside the window over the lake, the sun is a cinder. This morning while you were sleeping, there was a code across the hall. I don't know the details but through the door I saw the swarms of teams, heard the elevator ding when they rolled her away on the stretcher.

Sister, tonight I'll try to tolerate a sheet.

Let's pull it up toward my chin and then I'd like you to cup your hands near my face, ever so lightly, gently, as if you were reaching out to pluck a piece of fruit ripe from a limb.