

Cento: From Nellie Bly, "Ten Days in a Mad-House" 1887

Another woman. I could hear her gently.
Her remarks, rational as any.

They choked her, yes, choked her, then dragged her into the closet, and I heard her cries hushed
and smothered.

How to get out?
Every door being locked.

I wondered if I should be able to pass over the river
to my strange ambition,
to become an inmate of the halls
inhabited by my mentally wrecked sisters.

What is this place?
I asked of the man
who had his fingers sunk
into the flesh of my arm.

"Blackwell's Island, an insane place, you'll never get out."
And yet, heaven, not further from hell.

On bathing days, the tub filled, the patients washed one after the other
without a change of water.

"Well, I don't care," Nurse Grupe said. "You are in a public institution now. This is charity."

From the moment I entered, I made no attempt
to keep up my assumed role of insanity.
The more sanely I talked
the crazier I was thought to be.

Still, to be convinced that the most helpless of God's creatures were cared for kindly.

A pretty young woman spoke
so little English, I could not get her story
except as told by the nurses.

Her husband put her in. She had a fondness
for other men.

I felt sure now that no doctor could tell whether people were insane or not, so long as the case
was not violent.

How to get out?
Every door being locked.

I watched patients
stand and gaze toward the city
they will never enter again. It seems so near,
and yet, heaven is not further from hell.

What is this place?
I asked of the man
who had his fingers sunk
into the flesh of my arm.

Another woman. I could hear her gently.
Her remarks as rational as any I heard.

ABOUT THE POEM

“Cento: From Nellie Bly, ‘Ten Days in a Mad-House’ 1887” was created from an article by Nellie Bly (1887). About the poem and the process of composing it, Amy Small-McKinney writes:

I have always been interested in investigative reporting, especially the early pioneers. I found an online site about the journalist Nellie Bly, filled with quotations and selections from many of her articles. Bly was asked by her editor at The World to enter Blackwell’s Island Insane Asylum, and she agreed. This exposé was titled “Ten Days in a Mad-House.” Because of her writing and her exposure of the cruelty, she said, “The City of New York has appropriated \$1,000,000 more per annum than ever before for the care of the insane.”

Every line, including the title, comes from Bly’s article. A few times I removed or moved around some of her words and occasionally changed punctuation or grammar for clarity. I wanted Bly to speak, to hear her voice. I am told this is a cento—my first attempt.



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