



Secret Wounds

Richard M. Berlin

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In his poem “A Psychiatrist’s Double Life,” Richard M. Berlin takes readers to the heart of his collection: “I became a doctor-poet / and my colleagues shunned me twice, / once out of fear I could read / their minds, and again for poems / that spilled the secrets of their love / and hate.” A medical doctor turned psychiatrist, Berlin sweeps readers deep into a world of medicine and presents it with startling honesty and an eye for the beauty that lives in the flaws and wounds of humanity. In his revelations, he walks a thin line between the loves and hatreds that mark the exhausting days of those who glimpse, and sometimes prod, the bodies and minds they take under their care.

Throughout his book, Berlin presents all matters of the medical world, ranging from the humiliations endured during his own medical training to times when “the patient / is the enemy, one more life and death / decision before the possibility of sleep” (“Rage”). Indeed, the harsh moments he uncovers stay with readers, but so, too, do the times of complete helplessness and frustration. In “Whores,” Berlin draws a witty comparison between insurance and prostitution: “like an enlisted man / on leave / easing a big / bill in a stripper’s G-string,” a patient delivers his co-pay and reveals his complicity as he “fills out forms / for insurance pimps / who won’t pay / unless I reveal / the private parts.” The poem “Bad Debts” illuminates the losses that a psychiatrist sometimes faces. He ends the poem with the \$30 debt from the man whose suicide note read “tell / the doc he was my best friend. / Tell him I’m sorry / I still owe him money.” Moreover, his arresting description of the body—from the clot “trapped in the lattice of her lungs” (“The Killer”) to the “gashed leg / filigreed with blood” (“Wounds”)—elevates the body’s imperfections into arresting art.

Winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry, *Sacred Wounds* is a collection that will prove its worth on the shelves of dedicated readers of poetry, as well as on those of public libraries. Additionally, Richard M. Berlin’s collection is a necessity for medical libraries, and for university libraries with training programs in medicine and psychiatry. His voice in each poem comes across as a trusted friend, one who, in the language of his last poem, “Last Concert of the Summer,” will “listen / to the heart when I’ve run out of things to say.”

JENNIFER FANDEL (Winter 2012)

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