

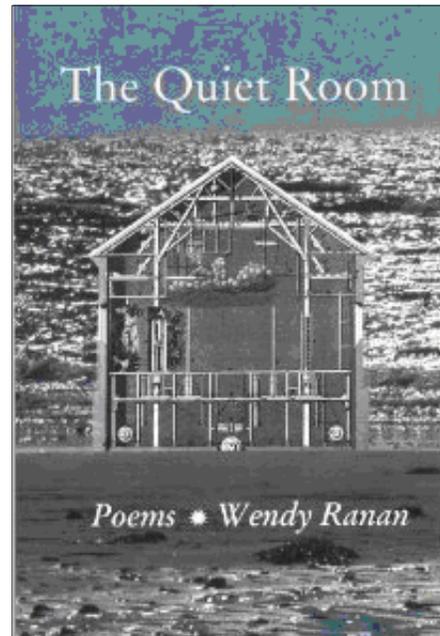
The Quiet Room:
Poems * Wendy Ranan
Deerbrook Editions
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Review by Doug Holder

Wendy Ranan is a psychotherapist at McLean Hospital, and is an accomplished poet. Both Ranan and I have worked at McLean, (a psychiatric hospital that has been designated a national literary landmark) for decades. At McLean Anne Sexton lead her famed workshops, Robert Lowell paced the halls of Bowditch House, and Sylvia Plath got her inspiration for her novel *The Bell Jar*. Surprisingly Ranan and I have never met in the flesh and have not even heard of each other until recently. But Ranan connected with me through my friends at the *Grolier Poetry Bookshop* in Harvard Square. She sent me a new collection of her poetry *The Quiet Room*, and the book has a number of poems that concern McLean. Now a Quiet Room can be a room of one's own as Virginia Woolf once wrote about, or it can an isolation room for psychotic and violent patients who are in danger of harming themselves and others. And in a sense many of Ranan's McLean Hospital poems have a quiet contemplative sense to them, but in the background there is the buzz of inner turmoil of the patients and even at times the poet herself.

McLean Hospital is located about six miles from downtown Boston, and the grounds were designed by the great landscape designer Fredrick Law Olmsted. Ironically Olmsted was hospitalized at McLean and died there as well. On the grounds, on any given day, I have seen deer, muskrats, rabbits, coyotes, hawks, crows, geese, and in the past few years a wild turkey or two. This is to say the grounds, although much has been sold off in the past years, are quite beautiful and we are certainly not divorced from nature. And Ranan runs with this in many of her poems. Not to sound like some New Age guru--but we are all connected from the celebrated psychiatrist with all the trappings of prestige to the night janitor who cleans the floors of his office-- not to mention the toad that leaps into a protective bush to evade a predator.

No matter how the walls of the institution separate the wards of the ward--nature has a way of connecting and providing, however fleeting, a sense of transcendence. But it can also be a reflection of one's inner distortions--nature makes no distinction. In the poem *To Be Invisible* Ranan gets in the disturbed head of an anorexic as she runs through a field:



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*She sees that whatever grows
is gone; pods pushed out of trees, lilac
crusted under its smothering scent,
She speeds her pace*

*vanishing between reeds and blue lace
where no reaper can see her.
She hides in the hollow of socket, skull, anything
empty enough to sing through.*

And in the poem *Asylum* nature intercedes, clowning around, breaking the boundaries of the institution--and also providing a window for self awareness:

*The new staff doesn't yet know /about boundaries,/how not to allow/the
wildlife in too close/where crumbs are flung/from the ward's veranda/to
crows clowning/between the growing rows/ of need. One dons a paper cup/
for beak and struts upright;/others settle disputes publicly/with aplomb or
loiter like birds/Hitchcock cast to attack, the first twist in song, audible/ even
to these frozen/figures strapped/into wheelchairs and rolled over Olmsted
lawns./...The turn of sweet birds/bloom from a warped mind wanting,/above
all/to catapult viewers/into spasms of heightened awareness/wings beat back
into boarded doors.*

I have only chosen to focus on the McLean poems in this collection, but there is a great deal of other work to admire.

Ranan inscribed my review copy with: *From another voice in the tunnels.* At McLean there is a network of underground tunnels that connect the various units of the hospital. And I think in a sense working at McLean is working underground. We work with a slice of life that is often not seen by the general population. The clients we see are often underground with their pain and their lives. Ranan brings some light to the end of the tunnels through her profession and her art.

Highly Recommended.

DOUG HOLDER has worked as a counselor at McLean for 30 years. During many of those years he has run poetry groups for psychiatric patients. He teaches writing at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, and Endicott College in Beverly, Mass. His own work has appeared in *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *Rattle*, *Steam Ticket*, *Toronto Quarterly* and many others. He holds an M.A. in Literature from Harvard University