

Hugo Williams: 'The Art of Needling'

by John Field

'Art' suggests that inserting a needle into another person requires the acquisition of knowledge and craftsmanship, as if Needling should belong to a Medieval guild. Look again and it also suggests that it's a magical skill. Either way, the title tells us that the best renal dialysis nurses are impressively skilled.

Williams' poem opens with the second person 'You,' casting the speaker as an initiate, dispensing advice to the anxious, jaundiced novice. So, we experience the usual feelings of blind confidence and disorientation when in the presence of an expert. However, Williams' speaker is not altogether reassuring, and the comment 'that some of the nurses / are better than others / at the art of needling,' leaves us wondering whether we should beam confidently at our own nurse, or recoil in terror.

We hang on the speaker's every word, as the poem's second sentence straddles the stanza break. We're under a spell and can be made to wait. Given the poem's liberal use of unexplained medical jargon, a certain familiarity with the subject has been assumed of us: perhaps we're a newbie, sporting a soft, fragile new fistula (a medical procedure which joins an artery to a vein to allow renal dialysis)?

And now, having laboured the scarcity of the Needling elite, the expert is revealed. Right from the get-go, we learn that this is a business in which the way forward must be felt for, and not blindly stabbed at in the sleepwalking way we all approach our routine tasks. One size does not fit all, and the combination of patient and nurse creates a unique set of variables: 'If he's any good / he'll take his time / raising or lowering the bed.' The stanza ends with the first of Williams' short, simple sentences, 'He won't forget the spray,' highlighting its absolute importance, despite this apparently trivialising reference to pain management, and the speaker's stiff upper lip. This shows how much distance there can be between the partners in this intimate act: how could a nurse possibly forget pain?

The next stanza elaborates upon the Art of Needling, as we move away from the paraphernalia of dialysis and towards the connection between patient and nurse at its heart. A good nurse, looking for a sweet spot, will be able to feel and hear blood passing through the fistula, and Williams shows the nurse's senses tuning into the patient's. 'Thrill' is jargon for the physical purring of the fistula, but also injects a pulsing excitement into the poem, as we marvel at his art.

But despite this, William's final stanza punctures the dream with his opening 'Even so,' and the subsequent trip to A&E. We've been suckered into this medical drama of tension and talent, and the story-telling trick of suspense allowed us to hope for a happy ending... but the old-timer's doing us a favour. Our fragile new fistula will need to toughen up and a 'blow' is likely to occur.

This example piece was written by John Field, who writes the [Poor Rude Lines blog](#).

Hugo Williams was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem 2013.

You can read his poem '[The Art of Needling](#)' here, which is part of '[From the Dialysis Ward](#)'