Passions in Every Room

For Luis

Finding my way through a bramble
of monitors tangled in the dense
undergrowth of thorny data.
Morning rounds are a forest
thick with prickly questions.

Perfect strangers become patients.
Personalities baroque
as the 50 year-old Hispanic man
admitted yesterday with back pain.
In prison for 19 years, (in America for 20)
Arms, chest, and thick neck

all Hieronymus Bosch
and guitar-string calligraphy—
one of his tears tattooed bruise-blue
at the corner of his right eye.

He doesn’t speak a lick of English.
Now his legs are dead
and his bladder AWOL—
the tumor declaring victory
over his spinal cord.
   He hasn’t wept in 20 years.

Every room holds a gift
reminding me that I’ll never learn
how much more there is to know.
From the end of the hall a radio—
Louis Armstrong sings
   What a Wonderful World.

In the east wing, sun-rise
for patients who wake up.
Some see hope, others a tease—
   Skies of blue, clouds of white.
The prisoner’s tears follow me
all day after the
   dark sacred night.
His Spanish was beautiful.