

## SHARON THESEN / The Consumptives at Tranquille Sanatorium, 1953

Bide time  
on verandahs, gaunt hills  
pine-dotted are the view  
beyond the book. Wild horses,  
black cattle  
cast shadows  
size of flies. Moving down  
from winter shelter.

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The consumptives are dreadfully  
thin; bright blood in white pans.  
They are given rest, like  
the lambs of Jesus rescued from  
tree limbs and lightning. White  
beds, white nurses, white  
cream by the cupful.

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Flies and hornets bash against the screens  
of the verandahs in the afternoon. Haze  
and heat, doze and fever shudder. The book  
falls to the lap. Across the valley, a horse  
sidles up to a pine.

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Quiet as the skin on a custard.  
Gardeners clip and prune and feed.  
Gladiolas' leek-like straight strong stalks  
of bursting beauty: a reproach? The  
delicate consumptives have had  
a difficult life—conquered  
by cities, bad air, bad smells, bad  
fiction, hard lives, a lack  
morals and of sunshine.

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Some of the nurses were unhappy.  
Not the cream of the crop. Forced to these  
purposes perhaps. (Must have been forced—  
or punished.)  
And disapproving  
though a charitable  
intent to some degree could redeem  
the situation.

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In the heat of the day, or the cold of the day, fall and winter,  
year after year the consumptives are wheeled out  
to rest and read on the verandah. And snooze  
and doze. With double blankets and a hat  
and red and running nose.

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Early summer, fresh air flexing muscle.  
Season of buttercups, green lawns  
and tender vistas. A few cars coming in, going out.  
On Sundays, children: some quiet, some exclaiming.

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I was dressed nicely for our visits. Small  
crinkle-edge photos show us  
on the lawn or posing by a flowering shrub.  
My father would drive us from Vernon  
—not recalling what I felt, since once she had  
gone there, she was gone.

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Her dark hair grew black and long. Her young life  
grew older. I learned to read. I drew a robin  
in Art.

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An array of consumptives lined up inside verandahs.  
Male and female, often young, often natives from the Islands  
or up north, or dank Vancouver or the war. Nurses  
shook down thermometers, served  
cupfuls of heavy cream and plenty of eggs  
from a nearby farm, a nice man  
moving among herds and flocks.

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Life was tranquil.

Effort discouraged. You gazed at the everlasting hills, cattle dispersing in spring, returning in autumn. The kind and frowning doctors came, the scowling and kindly nurses, fear of death palpable in the cleanliness and the climate, *better than Egypt*, said the local boosters.

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Heat shimmered, a torrid dryness camels could have pranced through jingling with saddles and pomegranates in the fictions the consumptives consumed along with cups of heavy cream and bowls of sturdy soup within the airy, scary verandahs of Tranquille.