

Varsha Kukafka

Poor Farm

Cambridge holds its dead days dear:
annotated plaque in tasteful cream on grey
informs, commemorates this edifice—
designed by Gridley James Fox Bryant of Boston
and the Reverend Louis Dwight—
where paupers lived in 1858 remote
from Brattle and all better streets.

On this mean swath dubbed Poverty Plain,
inmates quartered granite for the fortress:
wing for women on the far side;
dark rooms reserved for punishment.

Here, “deserving poor” bent over beets and greens,
threw nets in Alewife Brook to eke a thin reward,
until, among the orphan and the aged,
the delinquent and insane, they found some way to sleep.

Three streets down from Poor Farm—
now a French school under renovation—
on median between six lanes,
a woman moves in trance,
cardboard placard (“hard times”)
barely raised to drivers,
no footnote or historic map required.

Varsha Kukafka’s short stories and poems have appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *First Intensity*, *Wilderness House Literary Review* and *Lyrical Ballads*. She is a member of the Bagel Bards and Grub Street communities and her work has appeared in their anthologies