

"Write a poem that makes no sense"
—Hettie Jones

Marlene squatted on the hospital rooftop
agitated, wary
her frayed bonds with life
ready to snap, while

below, a rush of blue and grey uniforms,
pleading voices, as her
sister convicts
piled mattresses on the ground
that saved her
 when she leapt
 over the precipice

Today, guards tramp on that roof
and under it,
workmen erect walls within walls
seal openings to air and light
tear apart the old balcony to
build a steel mesh and iron cage

Death row
they are building
death row

here,
at Bedford Hills
on the third floor of the hospital
next to the nursery

a shadow
over the wide-eyed infants,
 robust toddlers,
a curse upon their mothers,
 all of us

Marlene rests quietly
her wounds heal
but the mad fury that drove her
is loose

sweeping over the prison
 through this land
waiting to taste first blood

no mattresses next time
no mercy

Judith Clark
Bedford Hills Prison
Fall 1995