End of a Night Shift on a Nightingale Ward

There is no comfort like buttered toast
before dawn – in a huddle under lamplight –
five o'clock toast – buttered and shared
in the middle of a still-snoring
twenty-eight bedder
waiting for morning: night-nurses together
at their desk in the middle of the ward
from where they can still see top to bottom
still be seen from top to bottom
and still listen for every softest rustle of distress.
Years later – I remember tea – and toast
piled buttery in lamplight the joy of it
greasing fingers and lips before work
began again – the final back round – turning
still patients to ease still bones – rolling
them side-to-side to change soiled sheets –
wheeling commodes to bedsides –
combing bed-hair at sunrise, when east-facing
windows pinked between each bed – feeling
the stroke of a waking patient's hand
when words failed – the ache
of forced-open eyelids –
the early shift assembling – the gleam of tidiness –
the hawk-eyed ward sister, checking for straightness
and dried fat still on the desk – bright in daylight.

Margaret Adkins.