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# MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

*An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts*

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Photo by Gonzalo Bearman, MD, see page 31



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# MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

*An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts*

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In this winter edition of the *Medical Literary Messenger*, you will find stories of illness and wellness appealing to the senses—the taste of wine or another unfinished dinner, the sound of a phone in the middle of the night, the things that draw the eye in the room of a dying boy. We feature our first reflection from the VCU Internal Medicine residency program’s *Diastole* blog. Winter brings time for rest and reflection, and we hope this edition may bring you both.

Megan Lemay, MD | Associate Editor

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# Home Visit

His shaved head rests  
on a Ninja Turtle pillowcase

a glass of PediaSure untouched  
at the bedside—no solids

times five days. Tucked  
in the crook of his bluing arm,

his stuffed gray shark—  
boy deep in brain cancer.

By **Melissa Fournier\***

\* Author's note, page 27

# Stiffness

I didn't smile for seven years  
and now people tell me  
I don't that often.

Here, watch me,  
I don't have a thyroid  
anymore. It got cut

out three years ago.  
I never got to see it  
not even a picture.

I watched a thyroidectomy  
on YouTube to get an idea  
of what happened. Isn't

that funny? Even though  
it's gone I still can't  
relax when I sit in

my professor's office  
to discuss my professional  
future because all I can

think about is whether  
this latest dose is working  
or if I should get my blood

tested again, because last  
night I couldn't sleep  
and the heart palpitations

are back. Not the intense  
ones, just the fluttering  
sensation of air passing

through the valves  
that makes the next beat  
spasm and thump

but I can't focus on that  
because it makes the  
skin between my eyebrows

crinkle and people  
think I'm glaring.  
No one wants to hire  
a brooding animator.

**By Hannah Shea**

*Hannah Shea is a writer from western New York. Her poetry focuses on the daily experiences and symptoms of Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, an autoimmune disorder.*

# Exile

It takes two nurses to push the recliner  
closer to your silver crib on the side

where the ventilator feeds breath after  
copied breath into your lungs and lift you,

one holding the six-foot plastic oxygen  
limb, the other places you in the spindly

cradle of my arms. This is how I imagine  
I come back into myself, your skin

chafed by hospital air, angry-red,  
your head the size of a crochet ball

balanced on the crook of my elbow.  
So many things wrong with me implode

in your eyes, your mouth opens to emit  
a cry I can't hear. You arrive in a mold

too small to hold this cosmic injury,  
and look at me to meet you, to bleed.

**By Lane Falcon\***

\* Author's note, page 16

# Good Intentions

She cannot speak, but gestures, then scrawls a message,  
I've lost my tongue, I don't know how, I was drunk—  
as her cheerful doctor enters, towers over us.  
She's swollen, her mouth a mess, her hair a gray disaster.  
Tell her what's wrong with me, she writes,  
but his lengthy explanation of tissues, blood types,  
transplants—a litany of language—  
doesn't explain to either of us  
how she lost her tongue,  
but now I doubt her drunkenness—  
and now, despite my chaplain's badge  
and uniform, two of several clues  
he doesn't seem to note,  
asking if I'm family as he leaves—  
I turn to offer comfort, but she's eager  
to show me the scars beneath her robe, asking  
after mine, like fellow veterans—not of war,  
but a system meant to do no harm.

By Laura Foley\*

\* Author's note, page 29

# Resurrection

By Les Cohen, MD

**H**aving been a doctor for a half century, I can hardly believe that, so far, I've not had any serious acute or chronic illnesses. I know how fortunate I've been.

I can easily live with my weak eyesight, diminished hearing, aching hips and knees, and occasional forgetfulness. Unlike many family members, friends, and medical colleagues, my bowels, heart, and prostate haven't yet acted up. Why? I really don't know. Perhaps it is something out of my control—good genes ... or just plain good luck.

For most of my life I've taken pretty good care of myself: a reasonable diet for decades (until three years ago when Ruthie died); some exercise—before old age set in; no cigarettes for over fifty years; alcohol only at celebrations; regular checkups with good physicians and specialists; and extensive lab tests, X-rays, and endoscopies, all of which were negative.

Now I need reassurance to allay my anxiety.

I recently began having disturbingly morbid thoughts. This is unusual since I'd always been characterized by colleagues as uniquely easygoing. I wondered if other senior physicians had similar preoccupations about their health and eventual demise.

Over the past several weeks I've been constantly worried about my coronary or carotid arteries closing off and obsessing over cerebral or abdominal aneurysms leaking or bursting, destroying what remained of my life.

*“I recently began having disturbingly morbid thoughts. This is unusual since I'd always been characterized by colleagues as uniquely easygoing. I wondered if other senior physicians had similar preoccupations about their health and eventual demise.”*

Several weeks ago, while on the subway, I imagined having deeply hidden, previously undetected cancer cells in my viscera multiplying and invading my internal organs. While sitting and straining on the toilet I imagined blood clots moving rapidly from my legs to my pulmonary arteries. The other night, while reading in bed, my vision became blurry for a few seconds, and, unable to sleep, I feared I was entering into one of the many neurodegenerative diseases that had ravaged the minds and bodies of my patients.

It all began with Sarah's late-night phone call a few weeks ago.

“Jacob, I'm sorry to call at this hour. I hope I didn't wake you. It's about Milton. Something awful has happened ... I know I should have called weeks ago, but I have been going crazy. A month ago he had a heart attack, a bad one. ‘Massive’ was the doctor's word for it. Milton was shoveling snow! At his age! Can you believe, eighty-year-old Milton, in that blizzard, shoveling our driveway! I was babysitting at our granddaughters and didn't know anything until the hospital called. A neighbor called 911. She told me the EMTs found him near-dead in a snow drift. She didn't know how long he'd been there. They worked on him a long time,

then took him to the nearest hospital in Plymouth. He was unconscious for over a week. I thought we had lost him. But now he can't talk or move. He doesn't respond to anyone, even to me! I don't know what to do.” Sarah was sobbing.

“The hospital transferred him to an expensive nursing home, not even a nice one. I'm afraid it will eat up all our savings. I hope the temple can help us out. Jacob, I know you're retired, but maybe you, a doctor, one of his dearest friends, can help. Please Jacob, please,” she begged, “can you go and see if anything more can be done?”

I thought a moment. What can I do? Nothing. Oh God, he must be brain-dead. A quick death might have been a blessing for all his family.

“I'll go tomorrow, Sarah. I'll call you after.” I wrote down the directions.

Milt and I had been friends since we were kids; through grade school, high school, and for all the years after. He was a serious, studious, and principled person. I remember he was studying for the rabbinate when I began medical school and was best man at my wedding. Almost fifty years later Milt presided over Ruth's funeral and burial. I still recall his touching eulogy.

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Early the next morning I had to hurry: walk through the slush to the subway, take the T to South Station, then rush to make the 11 a.m. bus to Plymouth, and find a taxi to the nursing home.

I felt annoyed. Why? This trip was so futile. I know I promised Sarah to go. I owed it to them.

The smiling nurse at the Bountiful Gardens front desk greeted me.

"Rabbi Levinson is in the day room. Keep your visit short. Please remember he'll be taken for dialysis in a half-hour." She pointed the way.

Dialysis on an eighty-year-old brain-dead man! Unbelievable!

In a pastel colored room a semi-circle of elderly people, three men and two women in wheelchairs, sat immobile, facing a large flat-screen TV. It was showing an *I Love Lucy* rerun. No one was laughing. There was a faintly feculent odor floating through the strong pine scent.

I picked him out and pulled a chair alongside his. He was strapped in, probably wrapped in a diaper, a feeding tube in his nostril, an IV dripping, and a urine collection bag taped to his leg. I held his hand and talked softly. His impassive waxy face, vacant stare, and fixed gaze made me cry. Could dear Milt hear me? This eloquent, kind, and generous man reduced to this fate! He had been kept alive—if one called that life. The day-room patients looked like preserved statues in Madame Tussaud's museum.

Poor Milt. His resuscitation was not an act of resurrection.

Long ago, like all interns, I heroically resuscitated dying patients to possibly keep them alive. None of us realized we may have made some of their families hope we hadn't been successful. We did what we'd been taught, and felt a surge of triumph for resuscitating near-dead patients, bringing them back to a persistent vegetative state,

***"No doubt many here had undergone medicine's last rites ..."***

No doubt many here had undergone medicine's last rites: the desperate mouth-to-mouth breathing, foredoomed rib-cracking chest-poundings, blistering electric shocks, poisonous resurrection cock-tails of IV medications, emergency tracheostomies, and every orifice and vein drained or infused by a plastic tube.

I left after only twenty minutes. I couldn't bear to stay longer. I whispered goodbye and rest in peace to Milt then asked the nurse to call me a cab.

What could I say to Sarah other than for her to call the physician in charge to stop the dialysis.

I feared that this may also be my fate and resolved, if possible, not to let that happen. But how? I'll see my lawyer tomorrow and sign Advanced Directive forms. A lot of good that would've done for Milt. ✧

*Leslie M. Cohen, MD, is a retired internist who practiced for a half century in the Boston area. Her stories have been published in several medical and literary journals. "Resurrection" is fiction but is based on her medical experience.*

# Visits

nursing home visit  
my great aunt tells her stories  
again

By Craig W. Steele\*

\* Author's note, page 22



# That Last Night

I imagine him  
alone on the beach that night  
before his flight home,  
to chemo, hospitals, us.  
Perhaps he watched sunlight  
drain from the day  
as he ate fresh conch,  
drank orange juice with rum,  
told the bartender  
how he lost his mother  
to cancer as a boy, his sister,  
father, cousins, grandmother  
to the Holocaust,  
grew up to be consul general,  
drive a Bentley, write three books  
in another country's tongue,  
chair a department thirty years,  
make a hundred films.  
Perhaps he spoke of us,  
on that last night's far coast,  
as Eden's bartender locked the door  
on the backs of the last  
of the revelers.

**By Laura Foley\***

\* Author's note, page 29

# Taste

We like the flinty wine, as clean as bone  
bleached white by desert sun. We love the line  
untrammelled by the fetters of design,  
which etches wave like moonlight fills a stone.  
We like the bitter herb, the lesser-known,  
astringent medicine, the bluest pine  
for burning when there's tincture to refine  
in order to achieve a certain tone.  
Our taste proceeds from embers in a fire,  
faint, first commemorations of a flame  
that lived an hour beneath a fading sky.  
Their colors cooled from white to red, then came  
to ash, from which our tongues, tasting, acquire  
the salamander's urge to signify.

By Dan Champion\*

\* Author's note, page 30

# Bumblebees Don't Always Sting

By Diane M. Parker

*I wake with a jolt. It must be dawn. Or is it dusk? I am unable to move. When I open my mouth to speak my lips feel swollen and my words come out in monosyllabic grunts. The voice I hear is not my own. It sounds Martianesque. Usually in cases like this my body works but my mind spins out of control. Today the opposite is true. I know exactly what is happening but have no control over my muscles. They have a mind of their own and refuse to cooperate with even the smallest of movements. I begin to sweat. Profusely. Suddenly I am drowning in inconsolable fear. My feet bear the burden of motion because motion is what will forestall death. But they collapse under the weight of my legs. My arms flail helplessly.*

*I mull over my options. I can lie here and hope someone finds me. I can try coaxing my limbs out of their paralysis and into a stand position. Or I can go to sleep and let death slide in beside me.*

I don't remember when my energy shifted from breakneck to slow motion. I was too young to conceptualize illness or disease. All I knew was my energy tank was on empty and I couldn't keep up with the other kids. I drank ferociously from the faucet until my stomach swelled into a water balloon ready to pop. The addiction became so extreme that my mother forbade me to drink more than a glass of anything at one time. But because my thirst was unquenchable and unrelenting, I would sneak into the kitchen and drink from cupped hands, sloppily, crazily, all the while feeling bad for breaking my

*“All I knew was my energy tank was on empty and I couldn't keep up with the other kids.”*

mother's rule.

The diagnosis would come months after the lethargy, months after the insatiable thirst, and, yes, months after the bedwetting. From the doctor's office I was whisked to the hospital where I became a patient for two weeks. The nurses took my blood and made me pee into a bedpan.

“Five little drops, Missy,” the nurse kept repeating in her Korean accent until I was finally able to give them up.

During that time I received several IVs, vomited too many times to count, refused to eat several days in a row, got too many shots, had to wear a “Do Not Feed” sign around my neck, and slept myself into a coma.

It was a big deal, I was told afterward. Apparently an intern kept dripping insulin into my IV and forgetting to check my blood sugar. As I started coming to, I remember counting the dots in the Styrofoam ceiling, in between pokes and prods from the ER staff.

This incident would mark the first of many and become my anthem.

Blood tests confirmed what the doctors suspected: Diabetes.

*I am nine and at a classmate's birthday party. I think I am Bo Bo the Clown. All the kids laugh as my mouth opens into a horn and I honk one too many times until my friends haul me into the bathroom and shove a banana down my throat.*

Before I could leave the hospital I

had to know all the particulars of diabetes. I had the symptoms of both high and low blood sugars memorized. I knew how to treat them; sugar for low and insulin for high. I learned the A group vegetables, the B group, when and how many of each I could have. In those days carbohydrates were not counted. I'm surprised I'm still alive.

*I am fifteen and at the height of self-consciousness. I must be cool at any cost. My girlfriend Mickey calls to find out how my date went the night before with one of the coolest guys around. I ask why she is calling and further insult her with rude remarks and then hang up the phone. I think we are done until I see purple knickers and purple shirt coming at me with a vengeance. Mickey is no longer on the phone but in my bedroom trying to drown some sense into me with orange juice showering the bed, the floor, and me. The frosted raisin bread, which I never liked anyway, ends up in Mickey's mouth because she can't pry mine open wide enough to shovel it in. The next scene, I'm convinced, is done, not out of kindness but out of revenge. I traipse into the living room in my finest of baby doll pajamas, offset by frosted raisin bread hair streaked with orange juice to find all my best friends sitting in a circle staring at me.*

Another of the rituals was to test my urine. Before each meal I'd clank the bedpan onto the lid of the toilet,

Continued, next page

pee, and plunk a speckled-blue pill the size of a dime into the test tube and watch as the brew fizzed up and over the top. I would hold my breath as the mixture turned the various shades of blue, then green, and finally the dreaded orange. Getting this color implied I was bad, that my blood sugar was way out of control and that I had caused it. Blue was the best color to get because it meant I had learned all my lessons. But I almost never got blue.

*I am sixteen when my family leaves in the early morning for a day trip. I watch them load fishing gear into the car, say goodbye, and go back to bed. I wake up in darkness. Bewildered, I go into the living room and turn on the TV, thinking this will help me unravel the mystery of my confusion. Ed Sullivan is hosting the Beatles. He is supposed to be on at night, why is he on now, I wonder. I try to sort out the evidence, but no conclusions are forthcoming. I will wait for an explanation once my family returns from their trip.*

The last and hardest thing I had to learn was how to inject myself. Practicing on an orange was one thing, punching a needle into my skinny leg was quite another. This was no easy feat for seven-year-old fingers. Often they would freeze as they aimed for their target. The paralysis would last as long as it took for my mother to give in and shoot me herself. Her aim was flawless, and her ability to puncture my skin with almost no pain, miraculous. I yearned to be as good.

*I am thirty and wake up inside my car, windows shut tight as spandex hugging skin. How long have I been here? I*

*see nothing but bushes. It is dark and I am scared. I am past sweating and feel drugged. How did I get here and how will I get home?*

Another of the rituals was to sample the new dietetic food fads. There was the hard candy that gave me the runs. And the sugarless chocolate tasting like chalk that had the same effect along with cramps. The ice cream was probably the worst disappointment because it offered so much promise. When I dug in, its texture was a replica of the paste we made as kids. And it didn't, as I'd expected, melt in my mouth and slide down my throat.

*I am forty-five and at the mall when I realize I have no cash. I find the nearest ATM. The intimidating machine stands tall before me in all its brightly lit colors. Do I push the red buttons, the blue ones or the green ones? I try several of them with mounting frustration after each failed attempt. The line, meanwhile, is swelling into fury. I buckle under the pressure and leave empty-handed. I wander off in a maze of confusion, and, like Alice, fall down a tunnel into ... where? What happens next is still vague. I am in the parking lot but instead of getting into my car I am careening off other people's cars. Minutes or hours later I am wrestling with a stranger I think is assaulting me. I lose the battle and find myself strapped to a gurney with veins pumped full of sugar bringing me back to sweet consciousness.*

I will never forget the day I almost died. The day the slow drip of the insulin made its way down to where skin meets bone and I lay deaf to the ringing phone, deaf to my friend's screaming, deaf to the fire engine shrieking

***“The ice cream was probably the worst disappointment because it offered so much promise. When I dug in, its texture was a replica of the paste we made as kids. And it didn't, as I'd expected, melt in my mouth and slide down my throat.”***

I'm here, and deaf to the forced entry as I'm wrestled awake by flooding my veins with sugar. But my body is in a watered-down sleep with no anchor. Shiver-cold sweat blankets my body until glucose overtakes insulin.

*I wake in a tangle of sweat-soaked sheets. There are bumblebees swarming above my head. I don't know what day it is or why bumblebees have decided to fly into my bedroom. I know only that I'm not afraid of them. How long have I been like this? My friend emerges from behind the bees. Her face is wet with tears. “What have I done,” I think to myself, already feeling the weight of my guilt, without knowing what sin I had committed. When I try to move my body folds in on itself like a potato bug wanting to be left alone. “Enough assaults,” it says. One of the bumblebees bends in close to me and speaks. It wants to prick my finger for blood to see if I'm dead or alive. It's beginning to make sense now. They are firemen, not bumblebees, bringing me back from the dead. ✧*

Diane Parker works as a clinical social worker. She is currently enrolled in an MFA program and expects to graduate in December 2018.



# Mental Status Exam

The neurologist says  
repeat blue, television, cat,

draw the face of a clock,  
spell world backwards.

Mother says the current year  
is 1958, refers to me

by her sister's name.  
This is what it comes to—

a single room with a railed bed,  
a cherry nightstand culled

from the family home,  
a gold-framed photo, pearled hairbrush—

her whole life lost

with the letter l.

**By Melissa Fournier\***

\* Author's note, page 27

## *Dystrophia I*

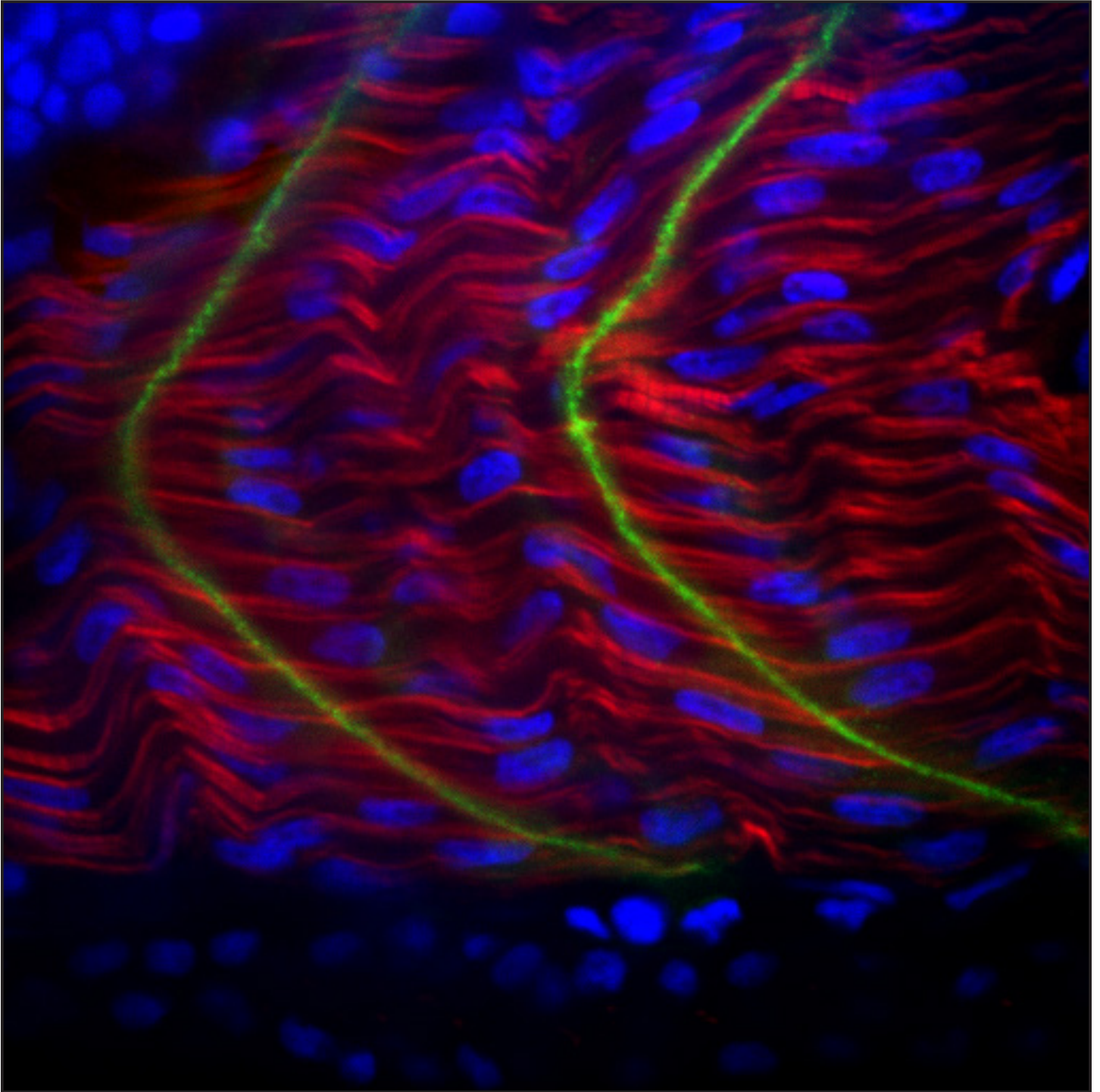


Photo by Ashley Purdy

*Ashley Purdy is a current PhD student in the integrative life sciences program at Virginia Commonwealth University, and she completed her MS there in 2016. She currently works studying developmental neurobiology using zebrafish models of disease.*

# Muck Out

By Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

My problem is my teeth. My dentist, Dr. Sasaki, told me I have severe periodontal disease and acid erosion. I told him I was only there for a cleaning

*Cleaning! You're so far beyond cleaning that you're in the category of Fukushima disaster.*

What's that?

*What do you mean, what's that? Fukushima—the nuclear catastrophe, worse than Chernobyl.*

Chernobyl?

*What? Have you been hiding under a rock?*

My TV broke and I work hard all day, cleaning barns. I don't have time to keep informed, and I don't have the money for complicated dental work.

*Look. I will pay you to go to Fukushima and shovel nuclear soil into black plastic contractor bags for one year. And if you do that, I will provide you all the dental work you need, absolutely free.*

So I got on the plane. I was carrying my spade, but the stewardess took it away, told

me it could be used for terrorist acts, told me she could throw me in prison for the rest of my life for bringing a sharp-bladed spade onto a plane.

I apologized profusely, told her I'd never been on a plane (which was true) and didn't know how to act. I told her I was just a poor farmwoman who mucked out barns for a living, and Dr. Sasaki had paid for me to fly to his homeland, which he'd abandoned so many years ago, to help in the nuclear cleanup.

The stewardess said, *OK. I'll put your shovel with the tuxedos and guitars and give it back to you when we get to Tokyo.*

She gave me a free drink, a Bloody Mary, for my trouble. She said we would be BFFs. She told me what that was.

I finished my work in Japan and came back to Dr. Sasaki's office, but, in the meantime, Dr. Sasaki had died. However, his son, also a dentist, Dr. Sasaki Junior, said, *What's fair is fair*, so he fixed my gums, fixed my teeth, implanted some really fine choppers, all for nada.

Now I look so good, I have a boyfriend, and don't have to muck out barns.

\* Author's note, page 22

# Endoscope

At the end of his third week, I couldn't understand  
the language he spoke in squeaks, the cry from behind  
the closed door in his throat. His eyes wouldn't latch  
onto mine, but he sucked as if he could climb milk  
into this world, oxygen. He fooled me and didn't.  
That night in the car seat, his head jerked one two three  
times to the right, the shallow flapping of a pinned leaf,  
the sudden *ebb* wouldn't let me sleep. On Tuesday,  
I set him in the baby bath and laid the rag, wet with warm  
water, on his chest. When he tried to cry his eyes swam  
up under the lids. *Dusky*, the nurse practitioner said.  
The cloud rose from some inner plexus, colored his jaw  
and lips. *Hypoxic* the ENT said, unsnapped the onesie  
and pointed at the shadows between his ribs, the bats  
in his clavicle. Then we rushed— my mother, the ENT,  
and I— into a room where I held his screaming head  
and the ENT thread the tiny camera along his septum,  
down into his throat, said *This is making me very nervous*

By Lane Falcon

*Lane Falcon's poems are forthcoming or have been recently published in American Poetry Journal, The Chattahoochee Review, December, Fifth Wednesday Journal, Gargoyle, The Journal, RHINO, and more. She lives in Alexandria, VA, with her two young children.*



# Leftovers

By Erynn Porter

It's hard to talk about absence, to explain what's not there. Absence is usually defined by what it leaves behind: the absence of light is dark, the absence of sound is silence, the absence of love is loneliness. I'm not sure how to write about the absence of eating. I could describe the pain; the weight falling off my body, leaving only bones and bruised skin; and I could tell you how I spent a year on only Ensure, ginger ale, and eating an Eggo waffle once a month, being so weak that I got around in an office chair and couldn't stand to shower. How I hid my boney shame with baggy clothes. How people assumed I did this on purpose, accusations of anorexia and bulimia flying at me. How many times I said I want to eat ... I just can't.

I suppose the best way to talk about it is through leftovers. The foods that I've been forced to exclude, throw away; shedding gluten and lactose from my diet. How I've been forced to limit what goes into my body.

## Before a Meal:

Before I can eat, I'll take a pill—or maybe two or three, one seems to appear and disappear every week. I'll stare at my mother who is at the oven, stove, toaster, or microwave creating dinner. She'll smile at me and I'll smile back, dread filling my stomach. I'll think back to what I ate that day, every meal, snack, and beverage and calculate the damage each brought to my stomach:

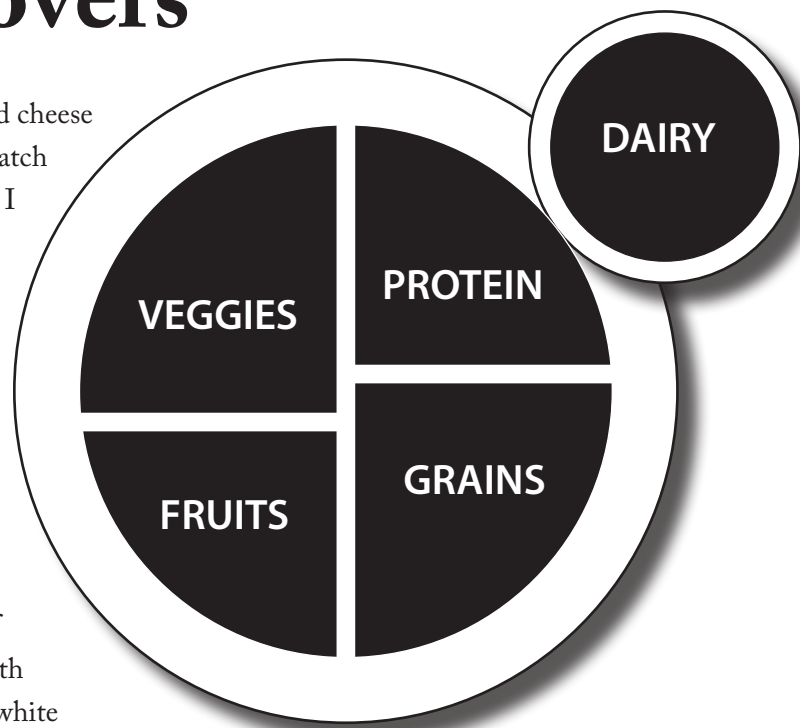
Oh, I had a ham and cheese sandwich, I better watch how much dairy I have for dinner. Oh, I had fruit for breakfast, so I shouldn't have too many vegetables.

Picture the food plate, the one that replaced the food pyramid of our childhood health classes. It's a small white plate spilt into four sections.

The largest section is vegetables, then grains, then fruits, and then proteins, which seem to be equal in size. Dairy is off to the side in a glass. This plate tells you how to eat healthily. I can't eat grains or dairy. My choices of fruit are much larger than my choice of veggies: too much of either bloat me up and cause very painful gas. To tell you the truth, I only dabble in each of these sections, never measuring up to their standards. My plate is very small, and the portions even smaller. They don't touch on this imaginary plate. This is something that is constantly brought up in doctor appointments.

## During the Meal:

How am I supposed to react when someone says I can't properly digest? I mean, isn't that my stomach's job? Don't I need that to survive? I stared at my doctor in that pastel green room, from that dark green leather table. The lights



were too bright and the room too cold. My doctor looked at her notes on her laptop. functional dyspepsia? How is it functional if it doesn't work? Please stop smiling at me, you didn't find the solution; you found the problem. How do I force myself to digest better? What do you mean I have to force myself to eat? What the hell is grazing? Isn't that what cows do? Wait, you want me to eat six small meals when I can't even stomach three?

My stomach appears to be allergic to food. It swells up like it's suffering from anaphylactic shock. I imagine it hot and red. Unsure. The footing rocky and that's just the first bite. After that, each piece falls like a boulder in a rockslide. I smile at others as I push things around on my plate, trying to make it look smaller. Sometimes even

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Continued from page 17

before the meal ends I can feel something rushing through my intestines. I'll place my hand there and feel my skin shifting. I'll have to bolt from the table and to the bathroom, leaving behind anyone I'm dining with. My food grows cold.

It's terrible eating with people who don't get it. They always stare at my plate. Yes, I eat small. They always say the same things. No, I'm not dieting. They always give me a side eye and a shrug. No wonder you are such a small thing, they tell me.

Maybe I should tell them about how many different diets I've tried. I've done all organic, gluten free, and dairy free. Then there's the FODMAP diet, the acronym meaning a bunch of complicated chemical names that some people have a hard time digesting; the BRAT diet, the acronym meaning banana, rice, applesauce, and toast. It's the diet they feed to babies. It's also known as the Bland Diet. I've measured my food in small amounts to graze on and I've done liquid diets. At some points I've done many of these diets all at the same time, leaving me so limited it seemed like all that was available was plain gluten-free toast and lettuce.

### **After the Meal:**

Scraping the leftovers into Tupperware, I try not to look at my mother, try not to feel guilty about not finishing. Try not loathe myself for something I can't control.

If I eat too much my body ejects the food from my stomach. I think the worst thing to throw up, food wise, is

watermelon. Once, at Grand Central Station, after not feeling too well on an overnight trip in New York, I threw up watermelon. I ran into the bathroom, slid on my knees into the stall, and bent over the toilet. Watermelon is awful because it retains its taste, sweet and pink, while mixing itself with bile, harsh and hot. I almost threw up again when I opened my eyes and saw pieces floating around in the toilet, like a gross punch bowl. I flushed and could still feel that wet grainy texture on my tongue.

The worst thing to throw up, period, is air. The absence of food itself. To dry heave so hard that there has to be something there but isn't. So my body just keeps going and going until my back spasms and I shake and maybe spit for good measure. The only thing keeping me grounded is the hand rubbing my back as I curl over the sink or toilet. I can feel my shaky hands holding my dyed red hair back and then it being held for me.

Throwing up in front of people is both uncomfortable and comforting. I hate that someone sees me at such a weak spot, to see me unable to control what's inside of me. The idea of someone watching me throw up is awkward, like it's a bad play and I'm the bad actor. There's no way to do it gracefully. Even if they don't see me I hate that someone is nearby, friend or stranger, and they can hear me. It seems like the sound grows louder, calling for attention, when all I want to do is be silent and small. I like having someone to rub my back or someone to sit next to me on the subway in New York while I'm dazed. It's nice to have someone steady and warm when I'm trembling and cold.

*“Throwing up in front of people is both uncomfortable and comforting. I hate that someone sees me at such a weak spot, to see me unable to control what’s inside of me.”*

• • •

It's hard to write about how my chronic illness leaves an emptiness in me that occasionally flares up. I once ate radioactive eggs so they could see why I couldn't eat. They didn't feel any different when they hit my stomach; all that was left was the bitter staleness of medical tests in my mouth. The nurse told me my intestines would glow for the camera. I laid on a table and was brought into a machine, similar to an MRI. I touched my stomach, wondering if the warmth I felt was me or radiation. Did my insides look beautiful? Were the eggs like fireflies drifting through my digestive track? I was photographed every hour for four hours to see if there was anything abnormal. They found nothing. I was left with an upset stomach, whether from the radioactive eggs, the absences inside of me, or the absence of answers, I couldn't say. ✧

*Erynn Porter has a BFA in creative writing from the New Hampshire Institute of Art and is assistant editor for Quail Bell Magazine. She has a chronic illness but that doesn't stop her from writing reviews, essays, fiction, and whatever else interests her. She's been published in Bust, ROAR, Brooklyn Magazine, and more. She's an obsessive editor, snow globe collector, constant candy eater, and cat lover. You can see more of her work at [erynnporter.com](http://erynnporter.com).*

# Another Autumn

## I. November

Splendor of red leaves now raked  
into piles of decomposition. Earth  
folded up and stored into barns. Evening  
on the anniversary of the great armistice.

(The reader of stars showed me  
the galaxy of calcite pinpoints  
in swirling dark. *Only a ten percent chance  
it means anything.*)

Then through the cord, the disembodied,  
absolute word of the magician  
who reads the message in the honeycomb  
broke faith with the years, jerked me  
from the known world into shadow.  
*Comedo. Cribriform.* All learning  
cracked in that second. No treaty  
with this intimate rebellion. Hurling myself  
against certainty like a bee  
caught in a jar. Was I *there*  
the moment before? Or was it another life  
folded into this one?

When sleep finally came, I stepped  
in a dream through octagonal rooms  
of a cluttered, roofless house of cardboard walls,  
tables and desks piled with papers, gutters  
leaking ice melt, back door opening to a broken  
step sloping toward a bare yard and leafless forest  
etched upright and gray,  
shrouded in late autumn fog.

Already the stars have lost their names,  
my choices laid on the table  
with scalpel and radiograph.

**Continued, next page**

Stunned like the song sparrow that hit the window  
and lay shivering on pavement,  
I pace the gravel toward the barn and my boots  
make no sound. Across the road  
a calf bawls, culled from the herd.  
Exuberant roots of poplars  
delve into soil, their sandalwood trunks  
rising indifferent and strong,  
sending branches across the day moon,  
hard and white. Like a memory lost,  
a red belly flies from a birch tree  
leaving the landscape empty. Yesterday's worry  
drifts away like melted ice down the creek.  
Once cradled like gems, regrets and grudges  
dissolve; ambition turns to farce.

In the garden I meet an old neglected god  
striding in shadows, brown leaves in his hair.

Fog drifting  
along the grass silvered with frost  
opens to swallow me  
into its white lace.

## II. December

So this is resurrection: instant of knowing  
I've entered the world again,  
sailed though hollow tubes on dreamless sleep  
to another shore where praising women  
circle and the magician dances and sings.

Days from now,  
earth will take her first long paces  
toward the light, and I will meet  
at the moon's changing  
a crouching god who has trapped the sun.

For now, bees dream on honeycombs  
while bright stars circle  
cold and alone, eclipsed by the dawn's  
indifferent splendor.

*Deborah Fleming has published two collections of poetry, two chapbooks, one novel, and four volumes of scholarship. Currently she is editor and director of the Ashland Poetry Press.*

By Deborah Fleming



# Autism

She looks in my eyes,  
all the time,  
tries to fathom  
my mind,  
sits by my side,  
pries me with questions,  
apologizes  
for asking questions,  
apologizes  
for apologizing,  
tugs on my sleeve—  
What's happening in the movie, Mom,  
what's an atom bomb, Mom,  
what're we gonna do  
after this, Mom.

By Laura Foley\*

\* Author's note, page 29

# Nearly Sunset

sunset drawing near—  
Mom calls me  
the only name she remembers

By Craig W. Steele

*Craig W. Steele is a professor of biology and health sciences at Edinboro University in northwestern Pennsylvania. In his continuing quest to become a widely read unknown poet, his poems most recently appear or are forthcoming in The Lyric, Stoneboat Literary Journal, Mused: The BellaOnline Literary Review, The Literary Nest, Lighten Up Online, The Fib Review, and Journal of Humanistic Mathematics. He continues to write poetry as "The Writer's Poet" for Extra Innings online.*

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## Palms

By Mitchell Krockmalnic Grabois

Now that you're engaged to someone else, please give me back my belongings—the bed, TV, the furniture, the computer, the iPod, the paintings, the fine wines, my father's mandolin, my mother's loom—you can't keep those things.

Also, give me the money that I paid to bring you back to Wyoming, a place I never wanted to be in the first place.

• • •

Now I'm back in Michigan, my home sweet home.

Islands of garbage float across the ocean. They fester and reek. There's no

ice in the world anymore. The only ice is in the dirty martini I drink in the backyard of my tropical Michigan paradise.

My son is coming later to plant some more palm trees. There's no corn anymore, no soybeans. Granddad would have been surprised to see my sugar cane crop, the sweet smelling tassles flowing in the breeze.

I told him I'd never live here; I was pissed off at being confined by family farming. I wanted something bigger, something greater. I wanted more life.

There's no streets out here in the country, only dirt roads, dirt and gravel. I'm done with drugs, Granddad. I know I broke your heart, but that's what hearts are for. If you'd come from a city, you

would have known that.

Islands of garbage float across the ocean. They fester and reek, and the salmon and trout in Lake Michigan have given way to evil little fish that stowed away on river freighters and came up from Chicago.

It doesn't matter to me. I sold my boat long ago. I lay out in the backyard working on my tan and watch the palm fronds sway in the breeze. ✧

*Mitchell Krockmalnic Grabois has had over 1,300 of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the United States and abroad. He has been nominated for numerous prizes. His novel, Two-Headed Dog, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook or as a print edition. To see more of his work, google Mitchell Krockmalnic Grabois. He lives in Denver.*

# concentric

she lives inside a shell  
cut off, dried up and left  
shriveled  
in darkness  
dead ended, backed up  
and bumping  
right back into her  
reflection

spiraling in toward inner chambers  
sliding along pale walls  
down a hallway  
of winding thoughts  
she finds an open  
window.

slipping toward light  
reaching out  
one hand on a chair  
breathing in  
as colors change  
and life begins again  
roots itself—  
hope returns  
she starts over

**By Michele Riedel**

*Michele Riedel has been published in The BeZine and Versewrights online journals. Her poetry blog is at [wordpallets.wordpress.com](http://wordpallets.wordpress.com). She started jotting down her thoughts when she was eleven years old and continued writing in journals and experimenting with poetry when she was older. In joining River City Poetry in Richmond, VA, she found the support and motivation to refine her poetry through their workshops and critique groups. She has taught second grade, reading remediation, and English as a second language and can be found on the tennis court or teaching yoga when she isn't writing.*

# Hashimoto's

I feel like popping some pills tonight.  
I have a plastic bag filled with dried  
apples and banana chips that smell  
like cinnamon but I have one more week  
before the next blood test. Every day  
I have to take a nap. My sleep  
is irregular. It's the Hypothyroidism,  
Hashimoto's thyroiditis.  
I was one out of four  
that got my mother's specialty.

These people walking around me  
don't care enough to notice  
if all the trees have the yellow tubes  
drilled into their trunks to protect  
against pests. Here's observation  
number one: I know my hormone  
levels are off when I wake up  
in the middle of the night covered  
in sweat and trembling in my limbs.  
When I walk to Lake Erie

I expect to be comforted by thousands  
of floating fish in the harbor, their eyes  
picked out by birds, or splashes of ice  
stinging my cheekbones when I stand  
on gnarled hummocks. I wonder why  
I go through such dramatic temperature  
fluctuations. When I walk to Lake Erie  
something in my brain snaps  
and for seconds I don't recognize who  
or where I am or what's going on,

**Continued, next page**

how I got here. I call it brain fog  
my mother dealt with it for fifteen years  
before being diagnosed. Her hair  
thinned. Her motivation left  
she kept her bedroom door closed  
and napped. She didn't ache  
when she was asleep. My family  
didn't get out of the house.  
My mother didn't get out.  
I grew up on my own.

I shouldn't be complaining.  
I've only experienced it  
for six years. My mother has a quiet strength.  
I manage on six week waiting  
periods and blood tests and dosage  
changes. I have a clear head.  
I'm clearheaded. Don't you understand?  
I tell these people walking around me  
that one day I'll find the right dosage  
to keep my TSH level between .9 and 1.5

so I don't think about picking  
up the scissors on my desk  
and sliding them across my abdomen  
until my skin is the end of a frayed ribbon.  
The timer cap on the Synthroid bottle  
says I've been awake for 13 hours  
and 57 minutes. I can't remember  
what I had for breakfast this morning  
but if I really focus it'll come back  
to me. I do exercises like this

to prove to myself worthy  
of leaving the house.  
My roommate left the blinds open  
again. The clouds are dark  
blue against the night. They bleed together  
like watercolor washes over the moon  
as they drift from one side  
of the sky to the other. In 10 hours  
they'll be white in the sunlight.  
I'll start over.

**By Hannah Shea\***

\* Author's note, page 4



*“Thank you for sharing,’ I say, flashing Dan my best Mona Lisa smile.  
‘Yours is a complicated story about modern love.’”*

# Uncharted Territory

By Katacha Díaz

**W**e’d met at a dinner party and dated casually for a month before “the talk.” Dinner was ready, and while Dan mixed our Pisco sour cocktails I turned on the stereo. The hauntingly beautiful sound of Andean cane flutes and harps filled the room. Since we were getting to know each other and sharing life stories, I happily reminisced about growing up in Peru and my travel adventures over the years to visit with family and friends in the exotic land of the Incas.

And so, over bites of ceviche and papas a la huancaína, I smiled and listened attentively as Dan went on to reveal much of his personal history. Starting with his ex-wife with whom he was openly still very much in love, he moved on to his long-term married girlfriend and best friend’s wife; Dan unwound his life backward until he reached his childhood in Berkeley, California.

Even though I was grateful for Dan’s willingness to expose himself, I found his laissez-faire attitude toward risky behavior to be of concern. Hang on, I told myself, you’re navigating uncharted territory with alternative sexual lifestyles, and you’re in for a wild ride this evening.

“Thank you for sharing,” I say, flash-

ing Dan my best Mona Lisa smile. “Yours is a complicated story about modern love.”

“Correct,” Dan agrees. “It’s not a problem. Today’s dating world is a bit more complicated, don’t you think?”

I nod.

“Isn’t dating your best friend’s wife navigating a minefield that’s best avoided?” I ask.

Dan clears his throat. “Oh, my best friend has known about the arrangement from the get-go, and he’s fine with it,” he shrugs and tells me, smiling. “No worries. My girlfriend and I also have an understanding. We’re free to lead separate lives and hook up with others, and no questions asked when we next see each other.”

I shake my head.

“What?” Dan asks.

“Your arrangement is certainly considered risky behavior in this day and age,” I say, while deal-breaker-red warning lights are flashing nonstop in my head.

There’s always a first time for everything, as the saying goes. And this was the first time we found ourselves uncomfortably silent together.

“Why are you dating me?” I ask.

Dan shifts awkwardly and whispers, “You are fun, smart, classy and I enjoy your company.”

Life is short and it’s about choices.

“I am not into ménage à trois,” I say in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Truth be told,” he says wistfully, “I miss not having a girlfriend in town to do things with.”

“Well, you can’t bloody well have me as your pseudo girlfriend,” I scream to him.

Dan seems genuinely bewildered by my reaction.

We hugged and said goodbye. Dan mutters maybe we’ll see each other at the Santa Cruz oceanfront promenade, though in reality we never will.

Navigating modern love in the twenty-first century is a tricky and complicated journey. In our case, however, Dan and I didn’t have to rehash why and how the relationship wasn’t working or why we grew apart because we were actually from the get-go incompatible. ✧

*Katacha Díaz is a Peruvian American writer. She earned her BA and MPA from the University of Washington. She was a research associate at the University of California, Davis. Among the children’s books she has authored is Badger at Sandy Ridge Road for the Smithsonian Institution’s Backyard series. Her work appears in Visual Verse, Cecile’s Writers, Peacock Journal, The MacGuffin, Flash Frontier, Route 7 Review, New Mexico Review, The Galway Review, Skipping Stones, Coastlines, Gravel, Twisted Vine, Foliate Oak, and elsewhere. She lives and writes in a quaint little historic town at the mouth of the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest.*

# Skeletal Survey

mottled skin      darkened  
lips      the body splayed  
on a table in a blackened  
room      newborn bones  
bird-like      the face lit  
as if      she's starring live

By **Melissa Fournier**

*Melissa Fournier, LMSW, is the program director for a nonprofit bereavement center as well as a perinatal and pediatric hospice social worker in Traverse City, MI. Her poetry has appeared in the Dunes Review, The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, and Pulse. She was awarded the William J. Shaw Memorial Prize for Poetry in 2013. Melissa facilitates Writing Through Loss, a poetry and writing program for those processing traumatic grief.*

## Humanism in Medicine: Reflections from *Diastole*

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By Helen Lin, MD  
Internal Medicine Resident

The opening line to *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” could have easily been a description of intern year. I did not begin my intern year thinking it would be easy. I had an abstract idea of long nights, disgruntled consultants at 4:59 p.m., and the occasional skipped lunch.

At orientation, myself and fifty other shiny new interns received our “everyone dips at some point during the year” lecture. I had no idea. I began my first day of intern year on inpatient wards and struggled through the day. I kept telling myself to just survive. I survived—barely. Since that first day there have been more good than bad days.

One particular bad day taught me an important lesson. I had not been feeling well, had worked two long admitting days in a row, and was about to push through another early and long day on a busy service with patients spread out all over the hospital. I was tired, grumpy, and angry. I was not angry at the service, at the team, or the patients. I was angry at nothing other than being stressed, tired, and being so. I was angry at dipping, as if I should have been bet-

First-year residents in the Virginia Commonwealth University Internal Medicine Residency Program are writing to reflect on the *Diastole* blog. Diastole is the relaxation phase of a heart beat, which allows blood to fill the heart and later be pumped out. Residents use this blog to tell us what their heart says when they relax. The blog helps to normalize reflection during residency training, which is oftentimes demanding and challenging in ways new doctors never anticipated.

This reflection was written in response to the following prompt:

**Intern year is hard. It has its ups. It has its downs. Describe a situation from intern year when you had to turn lemons into lemonade.**

ter than that.

It was not until after pre-rounds, rounds, orders were entered, and notes done did I leave that black cloud behind. Feeling accomplished with that victory, my mood was better. However, I was disappointed in myself for letting my frustration and anger get the better of me and create a noticeably bad attitude through the work day.

Later that night, I called my mother, a family medicine nurse practitioner of twenty-five-plus years, and vented my frustrations about the day and the past months. She told me something that placed the last few months in a new perspective. That morning and the many mornings to come may be rough, but I have much to be grateful for. I do not have to worry about where I am going to sleep, when I am

going to eat, how I am going to get to work, or not having a job. Moreover, I have a “job” learning to be a person who can be there for someone else in their time of need. I get to go to “work” every day and delve into interesting stories and meet people from all walks of life. Having daily gratitude from something or someone is a reminder of how lucky I, we, in the health professions, are. Every day is an adventure. That adventure may not be the most enjoyable day-to-day, nor perhaps as we imagined it, but it is an amazing adventure.

While that realization has made some days easier, I will not lie and say that the rough days are not difficult. However, it has made some of them easier. Helen Keller said it best: “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” ✧

# Late Voyage

All her life, Mom dreams of an Alaskan cruise,  
smells of glaciers wafting to our yard in Michigan;  
she'll waltz in white, on white, brilliant as noon.  
Post-stroke, I push her wheelchair along the deck,  
wrap her legs in blankets.  
At Ketchikan, stewards carry her like a queen.  
But no husband appears to lean on,  
as she watches whales and flying fish,  
no partner to sip martinis with.  
No energy for love, no tongue for speech.

By Laura Foley

*Laura Foley is the author of six poetry collections, including WTF, Joy Street, Syringa, and Night Ringing. Her poem "Gratitude List" won the Common Good Books poetry contest judged by Garrison Keillor; "Nine Ways of Looking at Light" won the Joe Gouveia Outermost Poetry Contest, judged by Marge Piercy. A palliative care volunteer, mother of three grown children and two granddaughters, she lives with her wife and two dogs among the hills of Vermont. Please visit her at [laurafoley.net](http://laurafoley.net).*

# Sponge Bath

Soon bathed, refreshed, renewed, you took your way.  
The sponge and cloth, warm towels, fresh linen, flowed  
around you soft as mist, as gentle spray  
from courtyard fountain carved in Doric mode.  
I see in neck and shoulders how they glowed  
as when your mother bathed you as a girl,  
and see your breastbone rise, your breathing slowed  
by strokes as smooth as finish of a pearl.  
You hear an antique voice's cadence curl  
around your ear like cloth around a cup  
preparing it for formal feast, for whirl  
of company, for being taken up with wine.  
How strange to hear old verses now,  
as first caress of voyage meets your brow.

By Dan Campion

*A contributor to previous issues of the Medical Literary Messenger, Dan Campion is the author of Peter De Vries and Surrealism, coeditor of Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song, and contributor of poetry to many magazines, including Able Muse, Light, Measure, Midwest Quarterly, North American Review, Poetry, Rolling Stone, Shenandoah, and THINK. A native of Chicago with degrees from the University of Chicago (AB), the University of Illinois at Chicago (MA), and the University of Iowa (PhD), he works as a writer and editor in Iowa City, Iowa.*



## ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

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Statue of Oscar Wilde in Merrion Square, Dublin, Ireland.

Photo by Gonzalo Bearman, MD