

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



Volume 9, No. 1 | Winter 2023

Photo by Ann S. Fulcher, MD

See page 34

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine

www.med-lit.vcu.edu

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

We are proud to publish the 10-year anniversary edition of the *Medical Literary Messenger*. As we reflect over the last decade, we are deeply grateful for the contributors and the reviewers who have helped the *MLM* to both grow and survive our first decade—through the start-up years, a pandemic, and shrinking budgets. The prose, poetry, and artwork in our pages are stories of our humanity and shared experiences in and around the healing environment. As the project continues to grow and mature, we welcome new contributors and new editorial team members. We also welcome feedback from our readers on how to make the *MLM* more relevant, inclusive, and relatable. The journey continues . . .

Gonzalo Bearman, MD | Editor in Chief

EDITORIAL BOARD

Peggy Andrews-Depew Web Manager
Gonzalo Bearman, MD, MPH..... Editor in Chief
Priscilla L. Cash, BSN, RN..... Managing Editor
Brie Dubinsky, MEd, MDA..... Associate Editor
Soojin Lee, M3..... Associate Editor and Editor of Photography
Megan Lemay, MD Associate Editor
Jared Pearce, PhD Associate Editor and Lead Reviewer
Rachel F. Van Hart, MA..... Design and Copy Editor
Rebecca A. Mullin, MHA Associate Editor

REVIEWERS FOR THIS ISSUE: Gonzalo Bearman, MD, MPH; Priscilla L. Cash, BSN, RN; Brie Dubinsky, MEd, MDA; David Goldberg, MD; Jennifer Goldberg, MPH, CHES, CPhT; Catharine Good; Romina Gutierrez, MA, MLIS; Leigh Johnson, MD; Jean Kim, MD, MA; Soojin Lee, M3; Megan Lemay, MD; Jared Pearce, PhD; and Joanna White, DMA.

SUBMISSIONS: The *Medical Literary Messenger* encourages submissions from the VCU Community and from authors outside the organization • All submissions should be made electronically through our online submission page, www.med-lit.vcu.edu/submissions.html • Submissions may be printed anonymously at the author's request • The *Medical Literary Messenger* does not provide payment for works published in the journal • Copyright reverts to the author upon publication • The observations and opinions expressed by the contributors to Medical Literary Messenger are not necessarily those of the editorial board nor Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine • Submissions for spring are accepted December to mid-March; submissions for fall from June to September.

The opinions expressed in the *Medical Literary Messenger* are those of its contributors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of its editorial board or reviewers. The information contained in the journal's pages is by no means meant to be taken as a substitute for the consultation and advice of a medical professional.

IN THIS ISSUE

ARTWORK

Ann S. Fulcher, MD

Rachel F. Van Hart

FICTION

G. M. Monks

M. Kelly Peach

NONFICTION

Kathryn Kahlson

Keith 'Doc' Raymond, MD

POETRY

Susie Aybar

Kathleen Cain

Jacob Childs

Sandra Dreis

Christa Fairbrother

Carolyn Jabs

Judith Bader Jones, RN

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

Jay R. Newton

Rebecca M. Ross

David Sahner

Mary M. Sesso

Ken Simon, DO

Jefferson Singer, PhD

Kingdom of Immaculate

(For Mom, 1925–2019)

Once upon a time, all the parts
and parcels in The Land of Harriet,

the plains of permanent pressed,
the closets of order and color code—

so practical and so lovely to visit.
The spotless white sandals,

pearl-button cardigan, silk scarf
all set for a night at the clubhouse.

At her new place, I retrieve Mom's
hearing aids, clean her opaque bifocals.

Sunshine streams through the window
where Mother is dressed in a pants suit.

I take her hand, bring her walker,
but she asks for her flannel nightgown.

*Time for lunch, Mom. I saw a roast
beef sandwich on the menu. And chips.*

Mom registers surprise, as tissues (my GPS)
fall from her pocket unnoticed as she

moves along Memory Care. I am
the little bird, following breadcrumbs—

while Hansel, Gretel, and Mother,
stumble on in the darkening forest.

By Sandra Dreis

Sandra Dreis, a member of Winston Salem Writers and NC Writer's Network, will have her first chapbook published by Kelsay Books in December 2023. Her poetry appears in Flying South, Kakalak-Moonshine Press, The NC Literary Review, and Main Street Rag—among others. She received a Silver Nautilus Award for her debut YA fiction, "Ecowarriors, Bluffs of Baraboo." A retired drama teacher, she lives with her Jack Russell terrier, Jillian, who keeps her in shape.

Bipolar

Candy apples
and honeycombs
or is it electric eels and babies
scarred at conception?

What does the day ordain?
What remains
in synaptic clefts
after this and that?

The blade between up and down
is a double-mirror:
up dreading down
and down dreading up

while the steel tip
of a knife waits for a kind nurse
to guide it home
into a necrotic heart.

Later the ridicule
of your folded bones.

Did you think anyone
would be lauded
for writing of your demise?

Books are congested by words
of those who ricochet
between sky and dirt—
people with tattoos
of lightning inked
on damaged souls.
Yet they don't know your story.

Can you fill the indigent mind
of your maker with pity?
What was He thinking, really?
Of diamonds dancing
on the knobbed surface of waves?

Or maybe a sad dog shackled
to a quaking aspen buried
in leaves made of hearts.

By David Sahner

David Sahner is a scientist and poet whose poetry has appeared in journals on both sides of the Atlantic, including Tears in the Fence, Agenda, The Bitter Oleander, Connecticut Review, Catamaran, The Sandy River Review, Van Gogh's Ear, Blue Unicorn, Blackbox Manifold, Mudlark, The Raven's Perch, and elsewhere. His book-length collection, Hum, was published last year, and his work has been anthologized in several multi-author collections, most recently in a release from Anhinga Press.

Column

I never thought of the asphalt shingles on my roof
shielding our house from squalls and squirrels
or the rubbery white discs in my back, holding me together

My atlas carried the weight of the heavens, the axis spun me around
thirty-three vertebrae in my spine lined up
protecting me like soldiers on a front

Though, they were failing me
a leak of water spouted through my son's ceiling
yellow jelly burst from my lumbar disc, the storm pressed through the weakness

The capomastro cleans
repairs the disc, removes the bony part on the cord
pacifies the pain

My spine no longer zaps crimson red
my foot, no longer tingles like my tongue with peppercorns
I am stabilized, but a patched roof is not a new one

By Susie Aybar*

* Author's note, page 18

Becoming Inanimate

By G. M. Monks

The first time I became inanimate, I was seven and unaware of what had happened other than feeling I had become very small, almost disappearing. It was a relief when my mother picked me up and brought me safely home. She never knew what had happened. I doubt my inanimaters realized themselves what they had done to me. If I had complained, they would've acted surprised and said they were simply there for my wellbeing.

It took me years to fully understand my descent into inanimateness. It wasn't until I was in my forties that it became obvious. However, I never objected to quickly disappearing into the furniture like I was just another object in the room. I could've been the leather chair or the cabinets or the dull pictures on the wall or the beige window blinds.

I suppose there are some good things that come out of inanimateness, like empathy for those people who suffer it every day. The homeless especially suffer it. They sit on the sidewalk begging and people walk by avoiding eye contact as if they are a pile of dirty rags or a big bump in the sidewalk and certainly not worth even a friendly greeting. I have done that a few times, so I too have been an inanimater. It's ironic—if the homeless were able get some time with my inanimaters they might feel better, as if they had come alive. I guess inanimateness is relative.

To be more specific, when I become

“When I sit in the dental chair and my mouth is about to open, ready for the dentist to insert a metal instrument, I’m about to become inanimate.”

inanimate, I don't morph into a chair, a cabinet, or a big bump. I morph into a tooth growing out of a gum, near a fleshy tongue—a tooth that needs a cavity filled or a root canal performed or one that already had a root canal and is technically dead but needs cleaning or one that simply needs a good cleaning. Perhaps it's a bit more accurate to say I become insentient, but insentient is considered by some to be a synonym for inanimate.

How do I become a tooth and who does this to me? Dentists and their assistants—every one I've seen except one or two, maybe three at the most. That's a lot because I have lived in many places in the United States and have seen many dentists. I've concluded that dental schools don't provide a class called *Effects of Inanimateness*.

When I sit in the dental chair and my mouth is about to open, ready for the dentist to insert a metal instrument, I'm about to become inanimate. At this point, I'm still human. In fact, I'm usually asked a question or two or three and can give an answer. Sometimes we even chitchat. It's when the dentist and his assistant start working on me. It's then that they treat me as Tooth. Tooth must sit quietly while the Inanimaters scrape their instruments against or drill into Tooth. They go about their usual set tasks which they have done a million times. Since most often everything

is as expected, they can delve into their personal conversations. With abandon, they talk to each other about their smart kids, their exotic vacations, latest accomplishments, their kid's illnesses, their neighbors making too much noise, their old dogs dying, their cute dogs doing cute stuff because a Tooth on a table has no ears and thus no wish to join any conversation or not join it or to wish they would please shut up because quiet would help Tooth deal better with the drill noise, the scrapping, the fingers in the mouth.

Plus, Tooth can't ever talk, much less gossip or write a story about Inanimaters. However, my Inanimaters must know I haven't been made entirely inanimate since they never talk about juicy stuff, even if their assistant is their spouse. They don't talk about not getting enough sex, or wanting to kill a neighbor or the neighbor's barking dog, or how much money they make, or, if they suffer hemorrhoids, or fart too much. They never never never express their opinions about what they might dislike about Tooth.

Often, when cleaning Tooth they do not even look at Tooth, much less ask if it wants to hear about their snotty genius kids, their vacations, or home improvements. Sometimes they laugh. I watch them while they look only

Continued, next page

Continued from page 6

at each other while working on me, Tooth, in the same way I can wash a spoon without looking at it. I can look out the window because I know what spoons feel like and my fingers can tell when the spoon feels clean, and I can dunk it in the rinse water and set it in the drying rack, without even glancing at it, for I know it's clean and know where everything is just by feel.

Maybe they think because my mouth has been turned useless for talk, that my ears are useless too, and my body—the body in the chair—is just the physical support for Tooth, like a pot for a potted plant.

Sometimes I have partially re-emerged into animation such as when one dentist, who did not have his assistant with him, asked me a question. However, I couldn't answer as he had his fingers in my mouth. He kept talking like I do when I ask my cat something. My cat says nothing and just looks at me and I talk to her, and she keeps looking and I talk. Another dentist, who also didn't have his assistant with him, once asked if I like to watch hockey. I think he expected me to just nod yes. When I managed to get him to remove his drill from my mouth, I said I have no interest in hockey. He proceeded with his work and continued to talk to me about hockey, so I concluded he believed my brain had no opinion and was just a blob of matter above Tooth, and my words were just random noise.

At some point it occurred to me, I've never talked with an individual while at the same time having my

“Maybe they think because my mouth has been turned useless for talk, that my ears are useless too, and my body—the body in the chair—is just the physical support for Tooth, like a pot for a potted plant.”

hands on the individual, much less on his or her face, even less my fingers in his or her mouth, and not include the individual in the conversation. So finally, after many years, I had the courage to discuss my dislike of being treated as Tooth with my dentist at the time. Sincere apologies followed. But next appointment with him, he worked for the first time on my teeth by himself, and his assistant worked with another patient. I concluded in-animation abilities might be in dentist DNA and, if his assistant was present, nothing would have changed, for maybe they would've had no idea how to control themselves. ✧

*G. M. Monks's work has appeared in The Militant Grammarian, L'Esprit Literary Review, Birdland Journal, The Hunger, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, The RavensPerch, Kansas City Voices, and elsewhere. Awards include being a finalist in the Ben Nyberg Fiction Contest 2022, finalist in the 2020 Breakwater Review Fiction Contest, and runner-up in the 2016 Big Wonderful Press Funny Poem contest. Two stories were nominated for Best American Short Stories 2023, one of which was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Another was nominated for The Best of the Net. Her debut novel, *Iola O*, was nominated for the 2020 PEN/Hemingway Award for New Fiction.*

Infection

It starts like a tiny
flame of fear
popping into ignition
with a frictioned swipe
quick, noticeable like
a tiny fire burning
in my left kidney like
a flash of flame
transferring spark to match to
tinder to kindling—
kindling to kidney
flash of fear
crackling into infection
that back pain back,
painting in blood

That single flame graduates to
a dull ache,
comforting reminder of
hot coals to be tended, carefully turned

That pain like
the flickering licks of
fiery brightness
the hiss and steaming sizzle
when water boils,
soon cools, and settles
until the next time when
sparks fly with
that quick flick of flint,
that piercing fire
sharp with heat.

By Rebecca M. Ross

Rebecca M. Ross is a displaced Brooklynite living and teaching in New York's Hudson Valley, where she regularly experiences things like trees, mountains, and easy parking. Rebecca's work has been published in The Medical Literary Messenger, Writing in a Woman's Voice, The Voices Project, and others, and she has work forthcoming in the Dissent Anthology and M58.

Coffee Shop Thoracotomy

My first open heart surgery was gloveless.
That's still what bothers me the most:
the carelessness.
I was lucky.

She'd caught me staring twice,
she must have thought,
although I was just looking up
from the book I wasn't reading.

She rolled her eyes at her friend,
disgusted,
and seemed to reach across the room
and through my rugby shirt.

I felt a crushing hammer-strike
when she pulled back away
with the squelching clump.
Om Namah Shivaya.

Dark maroon blood dripped
onto the table,
into my double vanilla cappuccino,
over my Norton Anthology.
My lungs begged for oxygen.
My toes and fingers clenched.

Tearing open the pericardium
like a condom wrapper
she shook her head and laughed,
showing the imperfections to her friend:
bad valve here
fat deposit there
pawing at the weblike vessels.

Tossing it hand to hand
as though weighing it.
Squeezing it empty
and reweighing it
like a bag of sand
to replace the Golden Idol.

Gloveless hands fouled with
chocolate croissant
cucumber lotion
frat-bro ejaculate.

Bored, she reached over
and thrust it back in crudely
leaving it for me to close.

Relieved organs sighed
and slurped the fresh, bright blood.
With a snap and a wave
she sent over a double epinephrine
no foam.

By Jay R. Newton

Jay Newton is a poet and autism dad from Chicagoland. When he's not searching for the perfect notebook, you can find him listening to '90s music, enjoying pizza and air conditioning, and watching The Irishman. His chapbook, Effigies, was recently published by Pencil Revolution Press.

Nature's Flourish



Photo by Ann S. Fulcher, MD*

This multicolored tulip conveys the essence of spring and all the beauty that nature has to offer.

* Photographer's note, page 34

Complications

My dad asks the intern if he can go home
I wonder if he ever will
down the dripped-coffee hallway
tethered by tubes
wired to the window bed
his view confined
to the tan brick building
iridescent pigeons balancing
on the ledge

He wakes hourly
to unslept doctors
burnt out nurses
this hospital is broken
and my father is now, too
home is
as far away
as his old business trips
from New York to Asia

Between him and home
is a canister full of brown gastric juice
suctioned from his stomach
through his nose
with a plastic tube,
a bag of IV food,
a leak in his intestine
inflaming where the surgeons
put him back together

My bile can't be
sucked away
when the doctor assures
nothing in the surgery
caused this
made the blockage happen
actually there is no block
the defect is small
he says

Still, death
lingers
around the room
near my father
his gray skin crepey
with dehydration
his belly
flattened
with starvation

It hovers over
my dad's roommate
his shiny, bald head
pancreatic cancer
Spanish words
rolling behind
the curtain
that separates
and connects them

His roommate
tells him that
one day
he was walking around
like everything
was fine
and then the next day
he's here
and everything's different

By Susie Aybar*

* Author's note, page 18

Mother at Work

By Kathryn Kahlson

It's easy overtime money in the fire department to work for an officer who will be out training for the day. You work a little, run a few calls, get to leave around 5 p.m. Home for dinner! Sure, I'll work for Captain Thomas, his crew is cool, low key, no problems.

I had worked for him a few times and nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. His guys were smart and pleasant. They were happy to tell stories about calls they had run, fishing, hunting, NASCAR, and lots of topics I found boring. The plan: eat lunch, run a couple calls, the captain would be back, and I would leave.

Soon after shift change we were punched out to a nearby trailer park for a toddler in full arrest. Shit! We got a worker! This is going to suck and we got to get there quick. Lieutenant Kramer, in command, front seat of the engine. Being the officer for another shift is an audition during unpredictable chaos. The crew watches how you handle your calls differently than their regular officer. I could immediately feel the crew's relief at not being in charge for this call.

Our fire engine and ambulance were on the road in lightning speed. Lights and sirens blaring, plowing down the road, demanding a clear path by broadcast call of the air horn. "Get the fuck out of our way!" Heading to a call like this is fraught with difficult options. The crew is uncomfortable. Everyone is rehearsing their roles. What equipment to grab. Who

"Being the officer for another shift is an audition during unpredictable chaos. The crew watches how you handle your calls differently than their regular officer. I could immediately feel the crew's relief at not being in charge for this call."

will do what? Who will be the lead on patient care? Who will handle the family? It has to be seamless, no stumbles. I hoped the cops would get there first. When the cops make a clear path for us we get to wear blinders to the storms of emotion. We get to work! Inevitably, the child is either dead, or close to it, and the mother is out of her mind. She desperately hopes you will fix whatever is wrong and hand the child back. We traversed our way through the trailer park with measured speed, the speed bumps making time stand still then lunge forward again. Holding us up in a way that feels so unfair. When we arrived at the trailer, the driver set the air break, announcing our arrival. I threw open my door, jumped out, barely touching the fold out stairs, and headed straight for the trailer. I was met with an open door. That's odd, no family member in a tizzy, nervously guiding me to a child? Or no one standing out front, waiting to pass the child to the first sign of help? The trailer was dark and sparsely furnished. Had the electricity been cut off? Either way it's a dismal backdrop. Walking into the darkness I saw a young woman across the room kneeling on the carpeted floor at the edge of the living room/kitchen border. She was in her twenties, thin, wearing

tight jeans and a tee shirt. Long stringy wet hair blanketed her back and shoulders and spilled forward as she moved. She looked up at me, lost, hopeful, vacant, rocking her child back and forth. "He won't respond to me, he won't respond." I approached carefully, wishing I was somewhere else, anywhere else but this dark, empty, hollow trailer. I held out my arms, tilted my head, and with a soft, confident, convincing voice, "can I have him? Will you give him to me?" She rose to her feet, holding him close like a trusted pillow. Reluctantly, she surrendered his fate to me, putting his lifeless body in my arms. I turned to leave, almost crashing into the paramedic on my crew, he blurted out "I'll take him, if you have her." I didn't want to let the boy go. I'm a mother! I can't just let him go. That's not what mothers do! Oh, I'm a firefighter, that's right, he's a paramedic. I handed over the limp toddler, they disappeared into the back of the idling ambulance.

The mother went to follow, like a zombie staggering through a horror movie. They just know the way. I hastened her calling by asking lots of questions. "Was he sick? When did you last see him conscious? Does he have

Continued, next page

Continued from page 11

a medical history? Does he take medication?" I had to stop her, she couldn't go to him while they were working. I had to protect my crew from the only real obstacle, her. The force of a desperate mother. Who knows what she would do? Unleashing her would be like triggering a tidal wave. We made our way outside as I desperately tried to slow her from getting to my crew. She can't go in there! She can't see this. If I were her, I would want to be in the way, I'd want my baby. She answered me as best she could. We stopped and stood together in the street, halted with nowhere to turn. I reached with my mother arms, the arms that had hugged my own children. She accepted my invitation, it was me or no one. I folded my arms tightly around her body holding her head up against my heart. I would not let her go and she would not resist. She screamed into my chest with a force I thought would bring me to my knees. She sobbed and drooled, she shook and buried her mouth into my skin. Her grief and panic was deafening and went through every cell of my body, it had nowhere else to go. My uniform and skin were soaked from her long wet hair, her endless spit and the blood from her baby's mouth. My legs vibrated so rigorously I wondered if I could continue to hold us both up. I couldn't fail, there was nowhere else to go, I could leave no room between us. I stroked her hair and repeated, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I could not tell her it was going to be ok. That would be a lie. She could not lose her son and also be told lies. I thought of my children, I knew they were alive and healthy, safe, in a

clean home with electricity and comfort. I was not howling in agony, in a stranger's arms at the thought of my child being dead. I was not wondering how I could ever be whole again. How could I be me? And she be her? How is this fair?

Looking up over my shoulder I caught the faces of my crew, my team, my backup, my guys, peering out the rear of the ambulance. They were not "working" a full arrest. They were glued to me, mesmerized, they must have been relieved to be behind the ambulance doors and not in the street. No one attempted to take my place, to step in. No one interrupted or said they could do this better or offered to give me a break. I felt stranded and grounded as a mother showing up to an early morning nightmare, riding in on a fire engine.

I asked the man across the street, watching something terrible unfold from his front porch, "Hey, can we borrow your trailer?" I had to get her off the street, away from the eyes of the curious, expanding crowd, into a manageable space. He answered quickly, "Sure." I walked her in front of me into a trailer that completely contrasted hers. It was bright and tidy, safe and welcoming. She collapsed on the sofa at the far end of the room, looking at me in disbelief. I'll give her a job! "Do you have a mother you are in touch with?" She nodded yes. "You should call her now. How about a girlfriend? Get someone here you trust." She complied, crying through hurried phone calls.

In walked the police officer, finally! I briefed her on what had happened. Unfortunately for her, she walked

into a den of loss with lots of catching up to do. I melted away, retreating into the street and to the ambulance which housed my crew. Standing in the stairwell of the patient compartment, I pulled the door shut. My crew and another police officer sat quietly, staring at this beautiful blond haired boy, supine on the stretcher with his arms and legs resting at his side. Just how he had landed when they placed him there. How an exhausted child would look after he had fallen asleep in his car seat and been carefully taken to bed. His lips were blue, his skin pale gray. His mouth was painted with scant stokes of dried blood. I imagined him laughing, teasing, silly, innocent. Always exploring, making his mother bright, joyful, and in perpetual motion. The medic held a cellphone connected to the Medical Examiner. He nodded, he answered, he delivered detailed report-like information. Cold, cut-and-dried answers, no room for fluff or emotion, let's just get this over with. Was this it? Everything was still and frozen in space, nothing was happening. We are fixing nothing. I had delivered them a lost cause. No opportunities to tell anyone "we did everything we could." There was no work to be done, just gathering details to support an investigation. We waited.

Tap, tap, tap . . . I turned to the window of the medic door. My face within a foot of the glass. The morning light, warm and bright. Geez! Who wants in here now? From outside, looking up at me, was mom. Her face red and worn, swollen from tears, her hair half dry and tight. Her mouth formed words,

Continued, next page

no sound, “I want my baby, I want my baby back . . . please, please, can I have my baby back?”

I knew I had taken her baby and I knew she would never hold him again. She would never rock him or soothe his cries. A mother wants to hold her dead baby if the only other choice is holding no baby at all. He must be in her arms if she is going to say goodbye. When will she say goodbye? I have him and you don't. I slowly reached up, looking into her trusting eyes. CLICK, I locked the door. I would not be holding her again, absorbing her tears or enduring her screams. We were done. I looked to the police officer. “She's asking me for her baby, what should I do?” With seemingly fewer ideas than me, he looked to the floor and shook his head, “I don't know.” After a deep breath and a look at the dead boy, he climbed down from the back of the ambulance. I peeked out the window as the officer led mom away, she looked back at me, pleading for me to change my mind. ✧

Ms. Kahlson is a retired fire captain from Chesterfield Fire & Emergency Services. She also served twenty-five years in the Virginia Air National Guard, retiring as the unit's first woman colonel. Ms. Kahlson is a founding member of Frontline Writers, a nonprofit created by David L. Robbins to provide first responders the ability to tell their stories through the creative writing process. She has written numerous stories documenting her experiences in the fire service. Ms. Kahlson is currently working part-time as a truancy officer for a local school system. Her husband is also retired from the fire service and both her grown children serve in the military.

Summer Is Ending

My patient's face is as barren after surgery
as a storm-damaged oak when limbs fall off.
The loss of bone and flesh highlight eyes
that shine a penetrating blue.

His words ink on a pad—he has no voice.
He asks me for a towel to hold close to his neck
in case cancer bursts through an artery
causing an explosion of fatal red.

His doctor had offered a choice. Surgery
or spend what time you have left sitting
on your porch in Texas and enjoying color.
Plant scarlet milkweed for monarchs,
pick a bouquet of blue hearts. A cure
is elusive and summer is ending, he said.

By Mary M. Sesso

Mary Sesso is a retired nurse who volunteers on the Human Rights Committee at the National Children's Center. Her latest work appeared in Loch Raven Review, Emerge Literary Journal, and One Art. Her second chapbook, Her Hair Plays With Fire was published last year.

Threads

When mortality stared you down,
you nimbly fell back to life.
Almost gone and given up for,
you steadily rose from the bed.

Once more we sit face to face.
I glance down to see
a loose button on my vest which
presages the unraveling of your life.

Under the burden of death again,
gracefully you stride over the obstacles
laid on the road of your life;
Breathing vigor into those who surround you.

With a gentle soothing gaze
you accept your fate
and renew absolution
for all trespasses.

Grateful for the day, week, month.
This is the balance of your life,
not unappreciated and vacant,
but vibrant with meaning.

As I nervously contemplate
the loose threads of my life,
you forgive the harsh reality
which I bring to you.

By Ken Simon, DO

Ken Simon is a retired medical oncologist who is interested in the process of communicating with patients and families concerning end-of-life care issues. He has composed a small collection of poems about his interactions with the patients and families with whom he has worked.

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

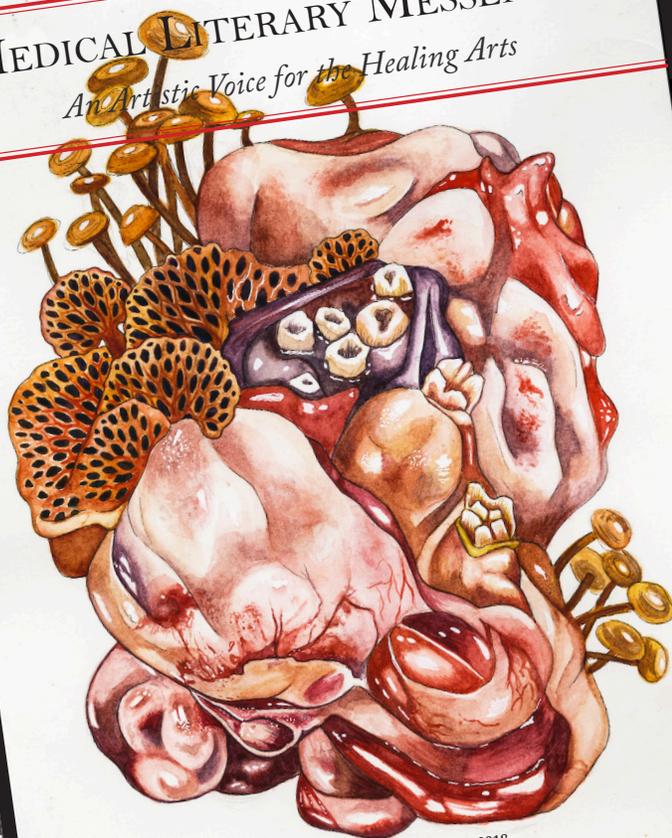
MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER
An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER
An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER
An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER
An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER
An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



Volume 6, No. 1 | Fall/Winter 2018

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

Illustration by Ash Reid, see page 31



Volume 4, No. 1 | Fall/Winter 2016

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

Illustration by Alana

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

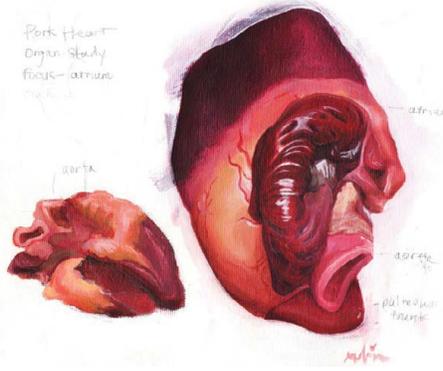


Volume 1, No. 1 | Fall 2013

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

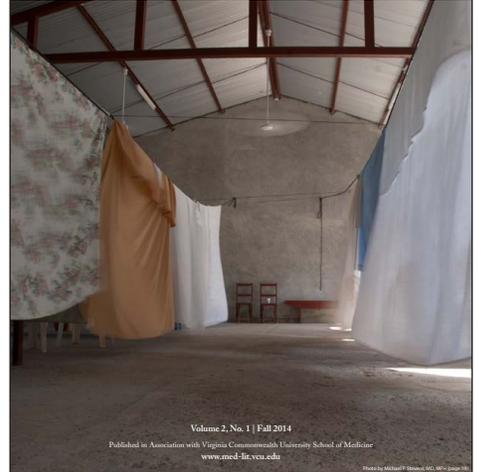


Volume 1, No. 2 | Spring 2014

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

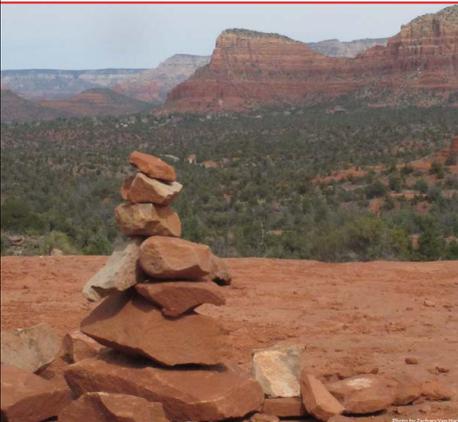


Volume 2, No. 1 | Fall 2014

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



Volume 2, No. 2 | Spring 2015

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

It has been my privilege and pleasure over the past ten years to design each and every issue of the *Medical Literary Messenger* from cover to cover. Every issue has its own vibe, a life of its own that is revealed to me as the pages come together. Thus, the process of selecting the cover art is one part aesthetic and one part attunement to the particular frequency of that issue. I love how this body of work changes, grows, inhales, exhales, mourns, rejoices, notices, and wonders—just as we all do.

—Rachel F. Van Hart, designer

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



Volume 3, No. 1 | Fall 2015

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



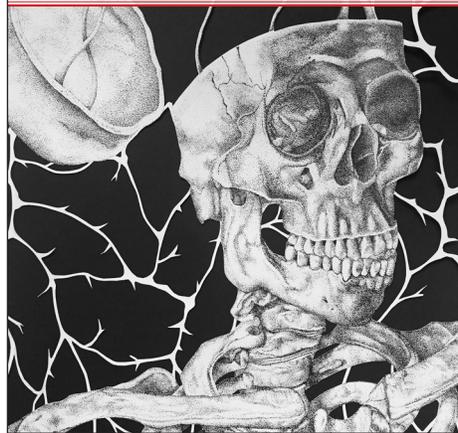
Volume 3, No. 2 | Spring/Summer 2016

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

Photograph by David Nelson Jenkins, MEd, see page 12

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



Volume 4, No. 1 | Fall/Winter 2016

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

Illustration by Alana Bamber

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

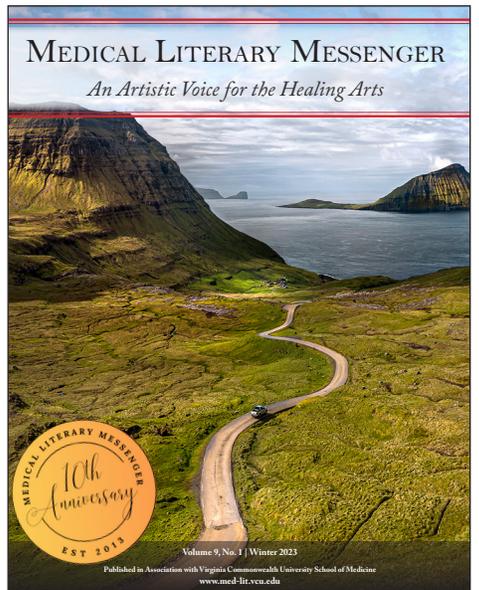
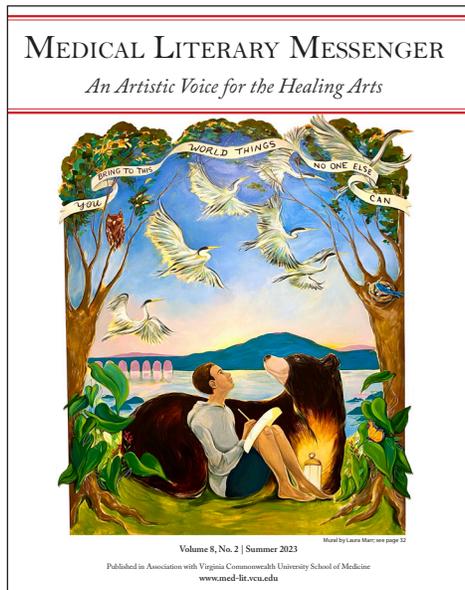
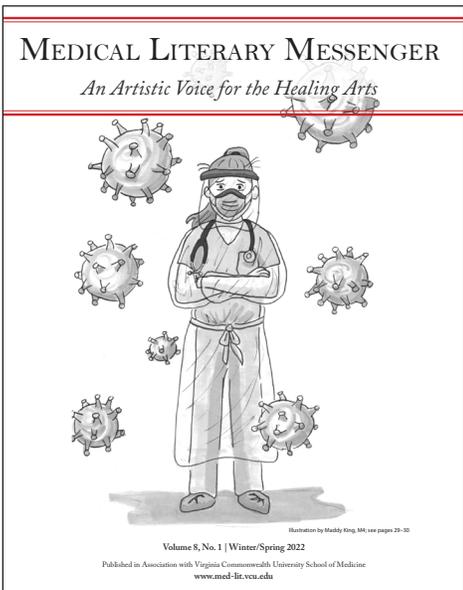
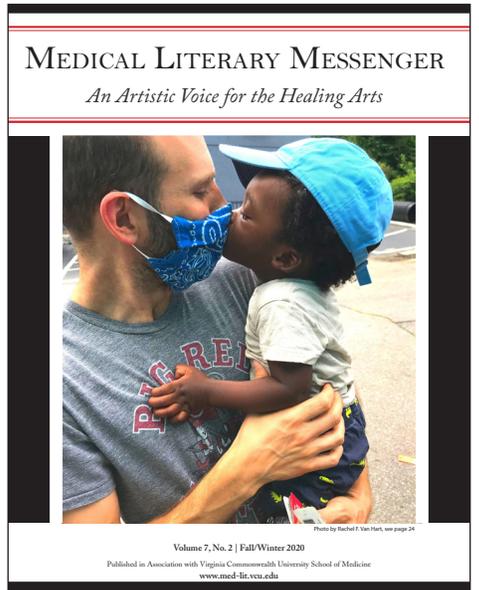
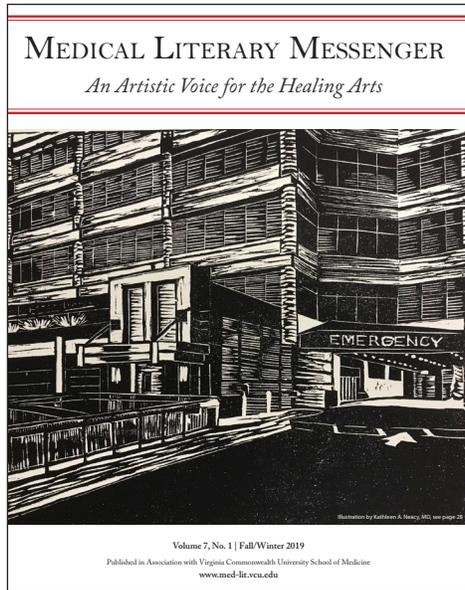
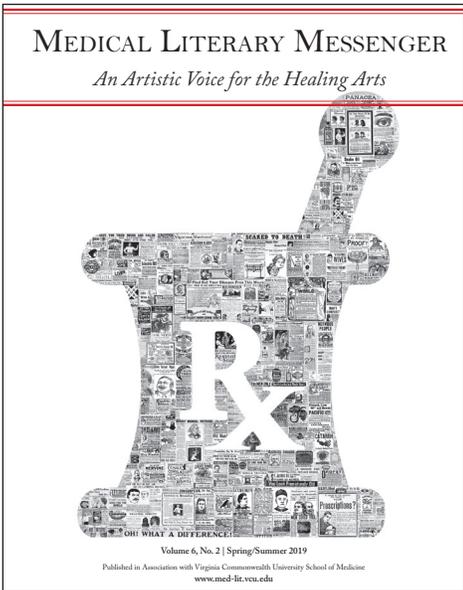
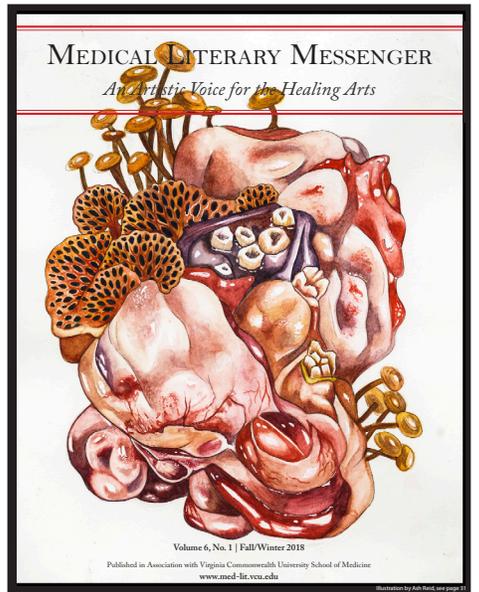
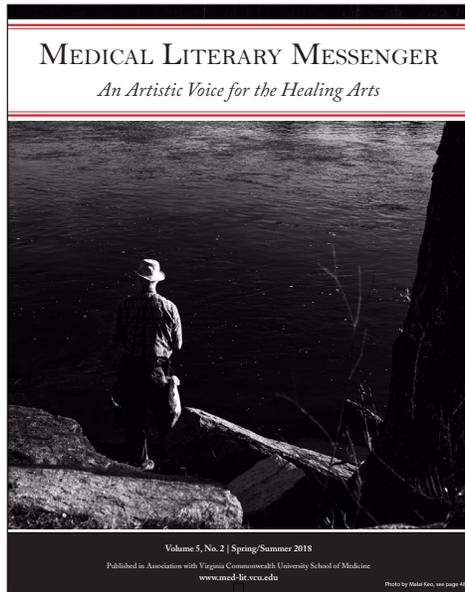
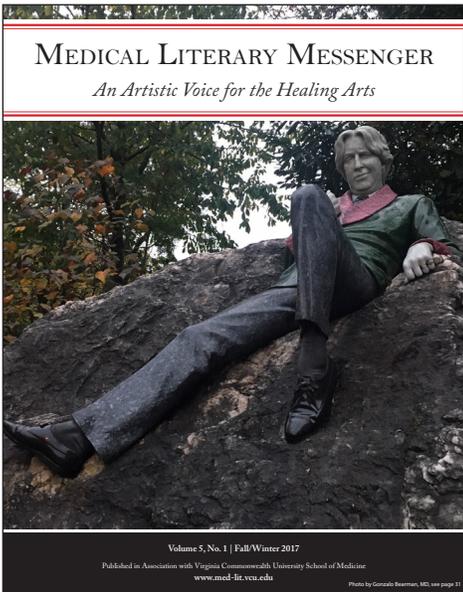
An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



Volume 4, No. 2 | Spring/Summer 2017

Published in Association with Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
www.med-lit.vcu.edu

Photograph by Alana Bamber, see page 24



He Doesn't Flinch

He drives an hour to the hospital
each day to visit my father
he buys me a Twix bar and Smartfood
at the lobby store

To get there, he takes the left
at the corner of 165th and Fort Washington
the one where I need to close my eyes
because buses come at us, bicycles, the whole city

February, twenty years ago, I was pregnant, sick
he slept soundly, like someone who didn't have kids yet
told me to wait 'til the morning for the doctor
I couldn't drive myself with a fever

He took me to the hospital the next day
slept home each night
until I asked him to stay
he didn't know that people did that

Drove people to the hospital
fed them Twix bars
held their hands
let them cry and scream

We have raised three kids
buried aunts, uncles, a father, step-father
he takes the left at that crazy corner
knows I can't do that

And watch my father
grow weaker, sicker
he slices me a green apple for the long ride
skips work

He walks my father
through the halls of the hospital,
doesn't flinch watching gastric juices
drain from my father's stomach

He makes meals, folds clothes
he has lost
two fathers this year
and doesn't want me to lose mine

By Susie Aybar

Susie Aybar is a Pushcart-nominated and Best in Microfiction-nominated writer from New York. She received a BA from Duke University, a BSN from Northeastern University, and an MFA from Manhattanville College. Her prose can be found in Literary Mama, FlashFlood Journal, Tiny Molecules, and Honeyguide Literary Magazine. Her poetry has appeared in The Twin Bill, The San Pedro River Review, The London Reader, Green Ink Poetry, Speckled Trout Review, and Anti-Heroin Chic. You can find her on Twitter and Instagram @saybar12 or connect with her at susieaybar.com.

She Was Reaching, We Don't Know for What

The hospice nurse gave us a book to read and in there it said that at a certain point a dying person appears to be reaching for something. That we shouldn't be frightened.

Even after all her years of experience, the author didn't know exactly what; maybe toward things, or people and worlds unseen by the rest of us. She should know, I suppose, having spent her whole life with the dying.

The nurses tending my sister repeat this, so we'll be ready when it happens. One aide even says she's reaching for Jesus, and my sister hopes to see Jesus, so for her sake I hope the aide, who reminds me of the fairy godmother in Disney's *Cinderella*, is right. Someone else says our parents. Or our brother Sean or our Grandmother Gallagher. The list of possible sightings goes on. All previously witnessed and attested to, according to the book of death and dying.

It's an odd comparison, but seen from the bedside late at night, my sister's increasing weakness makes her motions resemble those of a sloth, so beautifully deliberate; or of someone who has practiced Tai Chi for a very long time. By the time this happens my sister isn't speaking much, but she makes sounds along with the motions. Syllables, at least. I don't try to ask her what it is she might be trying to say. It's too late for that. Sitting beside her, I remember when she was a baby and I used to help my mother tend her, and how she would move her arms in the crib, just like she's doing now here at two a.m. Learning a new world.

By Kathleen Cain*

* Author's note, page 31

Stop Your Bleeding

By M. Kelly Peach

“Name?”
“Wilbur Horton.”
His right hand was immersed in a solution of Betadine in a sterile, stainless steel basin. The first joint of the ring finger had been cut clean off in a van accident. Blood from the amputated finger was clouding the brown solution.

“Quit bleeding and tell me your address,” said the nurse. With clipboard in hand, she was, no matter what their trauma, all business with every emergency room admission.

“I can’t stop bleeding.”

She glared at the young man. “Answer my question and don’t be impertinent.”

“But I can’t help it.”

She told the orderly, “Take him away. He’s incorrigible.”

A large man in white scrubs scrubbed clean hurried over. He dragged the uncooperative patient off the examination bed and placed him, with little gentleness, into a nearby wheelchair. He rolled Wilbur down a brightly lit, sanitary hallway. The left wheel had a bad bearing and squeaked with each revolution. The young man carelessly dripped a combination of red blood and brown Betadine onto his hospital gown, the floor, and the wheelchair.

The furious orderly told him, “Stop bleeding on my floor . . . and the wheelchair.”

He had just finished scrubbing the wheelchair clean after being fouled by a previous patient’s vomit. Now he would

have to clean it again and mop the hallway because maintenance in this place was practically nonexistent.

He threw Wilbur into a small white room with blank curtains and a station. It was a clean, well-lit place and had the typical doctor’s office unit with small sink and counter and cupboards above and below. On the counter was a sanitized surgical tray with a couple of shiny surgical instruments and a rolled bandage.

“This is a terrible place,” thought Wilbur. “Why won’t they take care of me?”

The telepathic scalpel leaped to its handle and exclaimed from the glinting sharpness of its blade, “What do you mean this is a terrible place?”

“I must be delirious. It seems like I heard the scalpel talking. And how can it balance on its handle . . . or read my thoughts?”

“You did hear me. I want an explanation!”

Wilbur, seated on the floor with his back against the wall, eyed the gleaming, belligerent instrument and thought better of his angry retort. Instead, he meekly answered, “I was hurt pretty bad. So, they rushed me here. The mean nurse kept asking questions and told me not to bleed on the floor but I couldn’t help it.”

“You have no business bleeding on our clean floors.”

The lead red corpuscle for the defense spoke up to defend its hapless young man. “I beg your pardon, but did you ever try to coagulate at three in the morning when the marrow is half

asleep and both femurs are wholly obliging?”

“I have not,” admitted the right honorable scalpel, attired now in a tiny, somber black robe. “Pray continue.”

“Therefore, your honor,” stated the triumphant corpuscle, “we move that Mr. Horton be fully and completely exonerated.”

“You are being redundant, but I guess that is to be expected,” said the scalpel. The judge turned its blade to the other instrument on the tray and asked, “Does the prosecution have anything to add?”

“Yes, your honor,” answered the stethoscope. “We would like to begin proceedings against the marrow on criminal negligence charges with the right and left femurs as accessories after the fact.”

“Noted. Court date will be set and accused duly charged. Or is it the other way around? Anyways, Mr. Horton, defense motion is granted. The court finds you not guilty. You are free to hemorrhage.”

The scalpel banged his handle on the tray and ordered the antiseptic magistrate to wrap up the case. The bandage hopped from the tray and on to the once sparkling clean floor now speckled with crimson drops. It rolled over to the still bleeding patient and, at long last, began its job. ✧

M. Kelly Peach lives in the beautiful Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He hikes, reads and collects books, and bakes. His author's website is mkellypeach.com; X (Twitter) is @MichaelPeach. He has work forthcoming in Suicid(al)iens, The Heartland Review, Ez.P.Zine, Vital Minutiae Quarterly, Ghost Light Lit, and AntipodeanSF.

Thinning

The ablation pruned the wall of my uterus
destroyed the thick habitat of possibilities

I won't sprout any more sons
tall and thin, like me when I was young

before I had arthritis to chew up my bones,
shave the edges, narrow the joint spaces

now the bones bump, grind,
groan against each other

like we do at night, but
with lube since drying

is a companion to thinning with arthritis
but it brings us closer

two bodies joined
like thinned bones.

By Christa Fairbrother

Christa Fairbrother, MA, is a Florida-based writer living with chronic illnesses. Her poetry has appeared in Cadence, DMQ Review, Honeyguide Magazine, The London Reader, and Unbroken, among others. She has work upcoming in Instant Noodles, Stoneboat, and Sunlight Press. She's also the author of the multiple award-winning book Water Yoga (Singing Dragon, 2022). Currently, she's excited about an upcoming residency at The Sundress Academy for the Arts. Besides loving books and the pool, she drinks gallons of tea. Connect with her: [instagram.com/christafairbrotherwrites](https://www.instagram.com/christafairbrotherwrites) or www.christafairbrotherwrites.com.

A Mother's Love



Photo by Ann S. Fulcher, MD*

Photographed on the shore of Lake Clark National Park, Alaska, this coastal brown bear cub lovingly tugs on his mother's ear to bring her in even closer.

* Photographer's note, page 34

Listening to the Sea Shell

I.

One day I stood up
and could barely stand,
the carpet shifted like a rolling ship,
then seemed to pass,
but later in a crowded room,
I found I could not hear.
By morning, all was worse,
dizzy, nauseous, sweating,
hearing a rush of air instead of sounds,
like holding a sea shell to each ear.
For my life's first time, I drew in breath
and thought that I would die.

Let me pause here in this account
and say, in truth, it didn't seem the worst thing,
I saw, in that moment, head against my pillow,
Anne mobilizing to get me help,
that I was ready—
I had loved and been loved,
I had worked and been rewarded,
raised two beautiful daughters
whose souls ennobled the Earth,
I had walked the arctic tundra,
had trekked the Milford Track.

Bizarrely, I shuffled all these thoughts,
laying out the face cards
on the table of my life,
as the room spun,
the air pressed both my ears,
I looked at what I had,
and it seemed to me, enough.

II.

Well, I didn't die,
no heart attack,
no stroke that they could trace,
the sudden loss of hearing in one ear—
no easy explanation—a virus, perhaps

“Idiopathic” was the diagnosis,
which means they have no idea.
The internet filled in,
happens to 1 in 6000,
50/50 chance of recovery,
flood the ear with steroids,
reduce the inflammation,
let the hair cells breathe again.
All tried, no dice,
I had joined the fifty
That makes the other half
sing praise for minor miracles.

III.

But you know what,
it's not as hard as you think,
one good ear goes far,
keep people on my right side,
stay quiet in crowded rooms,
closed captions for TV,
watch faces closely,
relish silent places.

Then there's tinnitus,
not a ringing, not a buzzing,
but a persisting rush of air.
How best to tell you what it's like?
Imagine a hotel fan
venting hot or cold,
or fluorescent lights' incessant hum
over an empty schoolroom desk.

The trick is not to think of it,
which after practicing for years,
I'm pretty damn good at,
but like anything worth doing,
it takes energy and effort,
meaning by day's end,
I'm just a bit more spent.

Continued, next page

Continued from page 23

IV.

Death entered me that day
and has not left, it lives
(if I can put it that way)
in my left ear's empty rush,
as if one side of me
has traveled to oblivion and stayed.
Do I mind?
Madeleine Albright once said,
*The act of striving is in itself
the only way to keep faith with life.*
Yes, but this endless quietude,
this void of voiceless space,
lets me know that death
is my certain partner,
as real as the first pink light of dawn,
as Anne's rhythmic breathing in bed beside me,
as my stubbled face staring from the mirror—
all are part of the whole—
with each breath, we both gain and lose,
With all due respect to Madeleine Albright,
faith in life is striving,
but also giving in.

V.

Help us, O Holy One,
as we do our best to listen,
to follow a forgiving path,
guide us both to love
and to accept the loss
of what we love,
help us to strive,
and to see the limits of our striving,
help us to move forward,
and help us learn to rest,
until on a final day
when we hear nothing at all,
it may be said
that our memory was blessed.

By Jefferson Singer, PhD

Jefferson Singer, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and Faulk Foundation Professor of Psychology at Connecticut College in New London, CT. He studied creative writing at Amherst College and Harvard University, working with Seamus Heaney and Robert Fitzgerald while at Harvard. Some of his recent poems appeared in the Winter 2022 poetry issue of Sixfold, August 2023 issue of The Raven's Perch, and the December 2023 issue of The Orenaug Mountain Poetry Journal.

DNA

An invisible identifier lies beyond
the acuity of sight and resides deposited
in the emotional quickening inside my soul—

becomes a guided cellular essence, a recording
to reserve and reveal, navigates the aura
of me, remembers the past, a kept code

knows who *I am*.

By Judith Bader Jones, RN

Judith Bader Jones writes to make sense of her world. Her poetry and fiction has found voice in hundreds of literary publications. She is an RN, and during her nursing career, she chose to work in psychiatry and obstetrics at The University of Missouri Hospital in Columbia, MO, and Kansas University Medical Center in Kansas City, KS.

Rabid Perversion of Memory

By Keith 'Doc' Raymond, MD

“Is it legal for us to meet?”
Beth looked into my eyes. The light flared off of hers, coming from the river. We sat at a decrepit picnic table. Annoyed, she answered, “There was no other time.”

We met in Monrovia, Liberia. Her parents introduced us at a mixer sponsored by the Mining concern. I was fresh from my training. I must have looked unsure of myself, newly hired. Maybe it was because I was the only black man not wearing a gold watch, or a gold ring.

She shined in the conference room lights, her brown eyes glassy from drink. Or maybe she just liked what she saw in me. I preferred to think it was the latter. She was pretty despite being short and broad. Despite the glaze, I had a sense of her intelligence behind those eyes.

“Magumba, this is my daughter, Beth. Beth, Dr. Magumba, just joined the concern.”

It felt like her parents interrupted us, as we were about to have a passing flirt. There were other single women floating around, sampling the male nectar. They seemed to gravitate toward the married men, those free of their wives. All the men present could afford to have a mistress out in the surrounding villages. Women that other men referred to when they asked their friends about their ‘little hut.’

I suspect her parents wanted a man of principle in their daughter’s life. I found out later she made a mess of

many of her previous relationships. What could one expect when she was a professional?

“My daughter here is a lawyer. I begged her not to come back to Liberia. But she insisted on serving our people.”

“Papa, you’re embarrassing her before this young man. Leave them be,” said Beth’s mother. She looked meaningfully at her daughter, then at me, and smiled. Clearly, I was a fly trapped in her parent’s web.

“Well, that was unpleasant,” was the first thing Beth said to me, as her parents walked away. They were busy greeting the General Manager (GM) when he arrived. So it began between us.

Flash forward five years and a picnic table. I squinted, unclear if it was the reflection on the water, or her response. “You lawyers! Eager to spin the truth into a convenient fabrication.”

“Let’s move on,” she smiled at me, a smile I knew only too well, “so there was no other solution, no treatment options?”

“Maybe in the city, in a civilized corner of the world. But ‘this is Africa.’”

“So being lost in the wilderness is your defense?”

“Remote is not lost. Access was the issue. Doesn’t matter where you are! Without the proper tools, I am hamstrung! Even highly trained specialists like myself. I had no choice. Getting the rabies immunoglobulin in sufficient quantity to treat the entire family was months away. The closest source was Paris. I used what was on hand.”

“And children died.”

“And children died, some of them,

anyway,” I agreed. I opened my empty hands to her, as I did to the family. My brown eyes bore into hers, until she flinched, uncharacteristically.

“Being the prosecutor, I’m just trying to understand what motivated you.”

“What motivated me? I am not a criminal.”

“That is yet to be determined. You claim you made your decision based on recommendations from the family.”

I nodded. “The window was small. The behavior of the dogs remained in question. Unprovoked bites from strays. That’s what they said, but the kids could have been pestering the animal, and the parents intervened.”

“Lots of unsubstantiated claims.”

“Beth, life is not a court of law. We can’t always corroborate a statement and gather evidence before we act. Sometimes, we have to take it on faith, on trust.”

“In your favor, you followed protocol as ordered by the concern.”

“Yes, treat the employee first. What remained allowed me to treat two more of the five family members with the immunoglobulin. Plus, I could vaccinate all of them.”

“Which you did?”

“I did.”

“Then how did you decide who you would save?”

“I think you answered that yourself. I advised, but I let the family decide.”

“Now they are claiming you forced a decision on them.”

“The time window for treatment is

Continued, next page

small. I forced them to decide within that window, when the treatment would be effective.”

“Could you not give partial treatment to all of them, rather than give a complete treatment to the lucky ones?”

“Not any more than you can ask a judge for a partial guilty verdict.”

At this point in my testimony, those present in the courtroom tittered. The judge banged his gavel and called them to order.

“Or get a woman partially pregnant!”

This time everyone laughed. More gavel banging. As everyone settled down, the heat and humidity in the court weighed heavily on me. Not to mention the prosecutor, whose husband, that would be me, was on the stand. The court reporter wiped her brow and documented the previous testimony.

“You said, you advised the family. What did this involve?”

“How do you choose who lives and who dies? I suggested they consider their health, their chances for achievement, and their ability to contribute.”

“Then you pointed out the losers.”

“Objection!” This, from my defense attorney, “The prosecution is testifying for the witness.”

“Sustained. Move on, counselor.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I left them to decide.”

“And after?”

“I treated those they selected.”

“But you didn’t do that.”

“No, I asked the family to reconsider.”

“Why?”

“He checked his rifle again. I checked my tranquilizer gun after loading the darts containing Ketamine. I would use it on the animals that were wild or didn’t come when called. We set out as the sky flared gold, lighting up the low scattered clouds.”

“Because I wanted them to be sure.”
“In fact, they believed you decided for them.”

“Objection, calls for speculation.”

“Sustained! Do you have any more questions for the accused?”

“I do. What happened next?”

We were facing an outbreak of rabies in the compound. I called on the local government officials, but they claimed it was the responsibility of the company. While I waited for a shipment of animal vaccine from the capital, the GM called a meeting. We had a lot of wild and tame animals in the compound, some having made it through the fence.

The GM recommended we slaughter them. I countered, as the unrest that followed would not be good for business. “What do you suggest, Dr. Magumba?”

“Once the vaccine arrives, myself and the best hunter we have here will hunt down and vaccinate the uninfected animals and kill those that are rabid.”

“And how will you know which has received vaccinations?”

“I will paint a ‘V’ on their right leg with white paint, Sir.”

There was a lot of muttering and discussion around the table. Silently, they voted in favor of the idea.

“Who’s our best hunter?” the GM

asked.

“Nyagoi,” answered one of the mining bosses.

“Get him,” ordered the GM, “Dr. Magumba and Nyagoi will hunt tomorrow.”

The morning was cool and clear, the fog finally lifting after lingering for a week.

“Good vision,” Nyagoi uttered.

He checked his rifle again. I checked my tranquilizer gun after loading the darts containing Ketamine. I would use it on the animals that were wild or didn’t come when called. We set out as the sky flared gold, lighting up the low scattered clouds.

The first half of the hunt went rather smoothly. We treated pets both large and small from cats to zebras. Then we checked the usual haunts for the feral swine and dogs, even treated a hyena. I had to grab an extra can of spray paint, but soon V-marked animals roamed the compound. It was reassuring to those encamped, even the pile of carcasses we assembled. Showed them something was happening.

The sun was high, and I could see sweat pearling in Nyagoi’s short black hair. I could feel the first hints of sunburn on my face, neck, and arms. We

Continued, next page

took lunch in the canteen. Local fish, imported greens, and cassava. After, we decided on a nap, wanting to wait for the early evening, when the animals foraged for food.

Nyagoi and I walked silently in the underbrush. He was far better at it than I. When we spotted the pack; we realized they had already spotted us. They were snarling and drooling, displaying the strange tail flicks we came to know as a sign for rabies.

The hunters were now the hunted, as the pack closed in on us.

Nyagoi aimed, fired, and reloaded his bolt-action rifle as quickly as he could. The booms of the rifle did not frighten the dwindling pack, as they should. I aimed at those that came too close, but there were too many. We faced rabid rage and deadly fangs as they probed ever closer.

Flashes of foaming mouths, low growls, and crazed eyes circled in on us. Just when I thought we were about to die, a line of fire came from the trees. Our gunshots brought the others. They mowed down the rabid beasts and saved us. Even then, Nyagoi took a stray bullet. A group of tribesmen helped carry him back to my clinic. I stabilized him after emergency surgery and gave him antibiotics.

Before I left the killing ground though, I stared in horror and regret at the carcasses scattered about. It was not their fault they caught the disease or the bullets that followed. A high cost to pay to protect the compound. My sadness gave way to joy, as I watched kids playing with puppies, both wearing white 'V's on their thighs.

“While you were out hunting, who was looking after your patients?”

“You mean the kids that were dying? Their family. Supportive measures could only prolong their suffering. It was a kindness for them to spend their last hours with their parents.”

“And did you? Hasten their death?”

“No, but I saved a lot more from dying that day. Every day, patients fill my clinic with malaria, yellow fever, and parasite infections. If I could prevent rabies, or at least arrest it while we waited for the immunoglobulin from Paris, then the hunt was worth it.”

“So you intentionally neglected dying patients? The family wanted, nay demanded, more from you.”

“I did not neglect them. Their memory of the events leading to their children's death must have changed with their grief. I've seen a lot of that living here.”

“Your Honor, the prosecution rests.”

What followed was a parade of defense witnesses testifying to my character and veracity. They recalled the children, parents, and the events surrounding the tragedy. Nurses came forward, and local family and friends. Then the judge retired to his chambers to deliberate.

“All rise. This court is in session,” called the elderly bailiff.

“Will the defendant rise,” the judge ordered after everyone settled back in their seats. The air was still and hot in the courtroom. Folks wiped their brows. The defense attorney rose by my side.

“Dr. Norris Magumba: I find you guilty as charged.”

People gasped. Beth, the prosecutor and my wife, cried out the loudest.

I dropped my head in despair. The defense attorney squeezed my shoulder. The courtroom was astir with murmurs and tears.

“I am not finished. Although I have found you guilty, I suspend your sentence. If we imprisoned every doctor for attempting to practice with limited supplies, all the physicians here would be behind bars rather than out practicing. This court, like Dr. Magumba himself, grieves the loss of those children that died from rabies. Yet you made every effort to serve your patients, going above and beyond, while placing yourself in harm's way. We can ask no more than that from any of our physicians. Dr. Magumba, you are free to go. To the family, this court offers its deepest condolences. This court is adjourned.”

Beth came over and hugged me. Soon we were trembling in relief and tears. As the court emptied, my defense attorney closed his briefcase and patted my shoulder. As we left the court, I thought of all the kids playing with their puppies, both wearing 'V's on their thighs. Then I went back to work, opening the clinic in the afternoon. Sad, but wiser. Our faith and their trust restored. ✧

*Dr. Raymond is a family and emergency physician. He has practiced in eight countries in four different languages, and is currently living in Austria. When not volunteering his practice skills, he is writing, lecturing, or scuba diving. In 2008 he discovered the wreck of a Bulgarian freighter in the Black Sea. He has multiple medical citations, along with publications in *Ars Medica*, *The Grief Diaries*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *The Satirist*, *Chicago Literati*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *Saddlebag Dispatches*, *Utopia Science Fiction magazine*, and in the sci-fi anthologies *Sanctuary* and *Alien Dimensions among others*. He is the fiction editor of *SavagePlanets magazine*.*

Paradise Island



Photo by Ann S. Fulcher, MD*

The beautiful setting of Mulafossur waterfall in the Faroe Islands offered a backdrop of leaden clouds, a jagged coastline, and the charming village of Gásadalur . . . a landscape photographer's dream.

* Photographer's note, page 34

When You Smell Grass

and the landscapers are mowing
and you are inside,
you know there's trouble coming.

Trouble is calling
with a "When do you take
the abortive?" call.

With a "What did you do
wrong?" goding, with a
"not again" sinking.

Trouble is migraine's
best friend. He's spinning
scenarios, prodding you

like a bully. He's taking
your usual symptoms
and inviting them in,

not luring them.
You do what you can
to assuage the assault,

but time is slowing;
pain is tapping a foot;
nausea is starting

to rock the sea
with growing swells.
You'd like to blame it

on the grass smell,
but you know that's only
the prodrome warning you.

By Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee is the author of two award-winning collections, Intersection on Neptune (The Poetry Press of Press Americana, 2019), winner of the Prize Americana for Poetry 2018, and On the Altar of Greece (Gival Press, 2006), winner of the Seventh Annual Gival Press Poetry Award and recipient of a 2007 Eric Hoffer Book Award: Notable for Art Category. Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals internationally, including Cimarron Review, Lifelines, The Massachusetts Review, Southern Humanities Review, and Women's Studies Quarterly. Her website is www.donnajgelagotislee.com.

Hospice

for Kelly

October light shines gloriously outside the window just above your head—such a beautifully shaped head, which I haven't taken time to notice since you were a baby, lying in your crib. How often we used to check your rising breath, as we do now. No more than a sparrow's rise and fall of air. Your hair's grown back after the last round of chemo, tomboy's length, tawny brown flecked with silver. But straight. No curl this time. Reminds me of mom's; of course it would. Disputing what you said you wanted, just a few weeks ago, what you'd written down even, you want none of it now. No light or music. No incense. Candles. When it comes to the truth of your leaving, you say you like the sound of our voices around you, talking as we usually do. You smile—was that a smile? We're careful not to mention food or speak too loudly so as not to startle you. And to leave the lights off, and hold your hand, yes, you nod, you want that still, as you leave this world. So, squeezing lightly, waiting for the return of the smallest pressure, and then its diminishment into mere touch. Our last and final language, sister. Sleep, now.

autumn light
touching every leaf
as it fades and falls

By Kathleen Cain

Kathleen Cain's poetry has appeared recently in Bristlecone, The Comstock Review, and Medicine for Minds & Hearts: A MycoAnthology of Poems Inspired by a Love of Mushrooms. She is also the author of a nonfiction book, The Cottonwood Tree: An American Champion (2007), selected as part of the Nebraska 150 Books Project. She lives in Arvada, Colorado.

Tapeworm

i.

When I was a boy,
It slithered up my spine
And carved its way to my brain,
Burying itself deep within my mind.

As I grew, it evolved.
I felt a shift, a change;
A whole new presence, a vice around my head.
It became an intrinsic part of my very being.

ii.

This pervasive entity
In the corners of my mind.
Worthless!
Coward!

Together, we share l'élan vital, the soul,
But are not one and the same,
Fighting at every chance.
Run. Get out.

iii.

Known as Pseudotumor Cerebri,
Its symptoms are that of a brain tumor,
But with no known cause and no removal.
Yet he's more than just that. . . I can hear
him.

He speaks with many voices, in many tongues.
Some of words, others of pain.
Weak! Sickly!
Burden.

iv.

He entered my mind when I was a boy.
Afflicting every moment
Through bodily torment
And cerebral suffering.

It has always been us,
A boy and his tapeworm.
All my anger, my pain—
It is him, my parasite.

By Jacob Childs

An avid poet and artist, Jacob Childs hopes his passion for telling stories can help garner more public awareness for rare diseases like his own. He is currently working on adapting the "Tapeworm" poem into a graphic novel to relate the devastation of rare illnesses to the general public.

Pivot Point

Out of our hands,
it could go either way.
Tomorrow's test determines
whether we resume
lives whose goodness
we didn't appreciate
or veer into the thicket
of procedures, surgery,
disagreeable treatments
that may not matter.
Today, with effort, I can still
imagine happily ever after,
close my eyes, make a wish,
touch a talisman for luck.
Right this minute, entangled
on the bed, covered only
by late afternoon sun,
we hold each other's hands,
refuse to let go.

By Carolyn Jabs

During the 40 years when she wrote professionally, Carolyn Jab's articles appeared in dozens of publications ranging from Readers Digest and Working Mother to Self and Family PC. Her essays have been published in the New York Times, Newsweek, and Orion Magazine. She has also written books, including The Heirloom Gardener, one of the first books about heirloom vegetables, and Cooperative Wisdom, an innovative approach to conflict resolution. After retiring from commercial writing, Carolyn made the pivot to poetry. Her work has been published by Quartet, Brushfire, San Pedro Review, California Quarterly, Evening Street Review, the Citadel, and Anacapa Review.

ABOUT THE COVER ART

Where Does the Road Lead?



Photo by Ann S. Fulcher, MD

This seemingly endless road courses through the sunlit landscape of Norðradalur, a small village in the Faroe Islands. Koltur Island is seen in the distance.

Ann S. Fulcher, a native of Virginia, uses photography as a means of preserving fleeting moments that will not recur and that in all likelihood will be lost to memory. Her goal is to capture the essence of a place and to connect with that place through the majesty of its animals, landscape, people, and architecture. Her photographic journey began in 2011 with a trip to the Galapagos Islands and has since taken her to many beautiful places both nationally and internationally. As a radiologist who has made a career out of reviewing images, she is delighted to combine her love of all that is visual with her love of travel and to share the images with others.