
MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



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Photo by Michael P. Stevens, MD, see page 32

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

With great joy, we bring you this edition of the *Medical Literary Messenger*. It brings a reminder that there is, in fact, joy to be found in medicine and illness. The tenderness of a nurse's touch, the rhythm of a dance, the encouragement of a friend. Take some time with the beautiful photos of a medical relief trip to Honduras, our first photo essay featured in *MLM*. Of course, with joy comes her sister sorrow, the loss of a patient, a spouse, or the loss of yourself in an illness. We hope these stories and poems help you experience the full spectrum of emotion innate to medicine.

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REVIEWERS FOR THIS ISSUE: Dawit Ayalew; Jared Pearce, PhD, lead reviewer; Laura Pedersen; and Joanna White, DMA.

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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.

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Solicitude

There's silver in this ointment I dab on.
We're in our Silver Age. The sore is sad,
a sigh of flesh. This is no Marathon
of gaping wounds. I tape on sterile pad.
I roll you gently toward your right. You've had
a restful night. I wonder what you dreamed.
I know you'd tell me plainly, good or bad,
if able. How the Golden Ages gleamed.
I fluff the pillow, raise your head. You deemed
this most annoying once but, since, comply.
This is our way. Resist the forces teamed
against us. Show them silence. Let them die.
The epic similes both soar and soothe.
I tuck you in and stroke the covers smooth.

By Dan Campion

A contributor to previous issues of 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 Able Muse, Light, Measure, The Midwest Quarterly, The North American Review, Poetry, Rolling Stone, Shenandoah, and many other magazines. 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.

R & R

By Claude Clayton Smith

Leo is in the office of Mrs. Ogilvie, housekeeper at the local hospital. He is interviewing for a summer job. It is the spring of his junior year in high school and he is now old enough to work. He needs to save money for college. As the newspaper article his father cut out and posted in the kitchen proclaims: TO EARN MORE YOU MUST LEARN MORE. His father never went to college.

Mrs. Ogilvie is a short woman in her sixties. She dresses all in white like a nurse but wears no nurse's cap. Her small mouth is a perfect oval of bright red lipstick. Her eyes are piercing and dark. Leo stands tall before her, hands clasped behind his back to conceal his nervousness. Mrs. Ogilvie is reading his application.

"Well, Lionel," she says at last, "we have an opening for a—"

"I'm called Leo, m'am."

"As in Leo the Lion?"

"Yes—my favorite kid's book. Actually, my older brother should've been named Lionel, after my father and grandfather. Then *he* might have been called Leo."

Mrs. Ogilvie looks confused, yet curious. "And . . . why is that?"

"His name's Leonard. L-e-o . . ."

"I see. I see."

Leo's nervousness resolves itself in further speech. "You see, my father named him Leonard after Major General Leonard Wood. Dad was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood during World War II, but he never was shipped over-

seas, which is probably why Lenny and I—and our younger brother, Larry—were born in the first place. Most of Dad's unit never returned."

And why am I rattling on like this, for Chrissakes, Leo is wondering. This is a job interview! But he feels a need to explain because she called him Lionel and he absolutely hates his name. He's never met anybody with the name of Lionel. Each year at the beginning of school—all the way back to kindergarten, for Chrissakes—he's shuddered when the teacher calls the roll because as soon as she gets to the G's and says "Lionel Green" the class erupts and the mockery begins: "Lionel! Lionel!" The only Lionel he's ever heard of is Lionel Hampton, the black jazz artist who plays the vibraphone. It's a good thing he's on the basketball team and not in the band.

Fort Leonard Wood is responsible for his very existence, as well as his name. And his father won't let him—or his brothers—forget it, all because his father knew how to type. How many times have they heard the story? After basic training the C.O. said: "Can anyone here handle a typewriter?" His father raised his hand, was sent to an office, and was plunked down behind a desk, stateside, for the duration of the war, ensuring the next generation of Greens—and Lenny's first name. Then Lenny gave Leo his nickname because of that kid's book.

Leo pauses for a response, but when Mrs. Ogilvie is silent, he shifts his weight and continues.

"My grandfather was exempt from

"Leo pauses, certain now that he's blowing this interview, blowing the job he will need this summer."

World War I because of his job at Remington Arms. But *his* grandfather fought against his own brother in the Civil War. Can you imagine that? Fighting your own brother? And now this Vietnam thing is heating up."

"Well," Mrs. Ogilvie says, "You're lucky. Our draft board is deferring college students."

"That's why I need a job—to save for college. My father thinks college is all about earning money. But it's more than that."

"Avoiding the draft, you mean."

"No, no. It's about reading great books and thinking great thoughts and—" Leo pauses, certain now that he's blowing this interview, blowing the job he will need this summer.

"Leonard Wood," Mrs. Ogilvie says, as if it's anything but a non sequitur, "was a doctor, you know."

"No," Leo says. "I—I didn't. I just know he helped Teddy Roosevelt recruit the Rough Riders for the Spanish-American War. My Dad told us about that."

Mrs. Ogilvie smiles. "Leonard Wood won the Medal of Honor. He was being groomed to be Roosevelt's political heir. But he lost the Republican nomination to Warren Harding—on the tenth ballot. And for the

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record, young man,” and here her smile broadens, “I think Lionel is a very nice name.”

Leo grins sheepishly. “No one’s ever told me that.”

“Not even your parents?”

“They don’t count.”

“I see. I see.” Mrs. Ogilvie smiles yet again and then takes a deep breath. “Well, Leo, as I was about to say before we got onto how you got your name, housekeeping currently has an opening for a wall washer. It’s not a very popular position, which is why it’s still available, and if it’s still available when school gets out in June, the job will be yours.”

“I’ll be back,” Leo says convincingly. “You can count on it. In fact, I was here once before, in the ER, just last year. I almost lost my li—leg. I got a bit of hemp stuck in my calf, climbing the ropes in gym. It developed into blood poisoning and had the doctors scared.”

Suddenly Mrs. Ogilvie seems to be looking right through him, talking to no one. “My son wasn’t so lucky. He was wounded in Korea. Blood poisoning killed him.”

“Oh no,” Leo says. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. His blood was poisoned already.”

“Huh?” Leo says, blinking. “I—I don’t understand.”

“Syphilis. From R & R in Kyoto, Japan. He was so ashamed he tried to get himself killed as soon as he returned to combat. He never wanted me to know.”

It is Leo’s turn to fall silent.

“You know what R & R is, don’t you?”

“Yes, m’am. Rock ’n’ roll.”

“No, Leo. Rest and recuperation. Rest and recuperation. Kyoto had special places for that, and my son took advantage of them. He couldn’t wait to get away from home. He didn’t want to go to college.”

Leo takes a step backward, suddenly wishing for this interview to end. Mrs. Ogilvie is no longer looking through him but nailing him square in the eyes. Yet her tone, surprisingly, when she speaks again, turns motherly. “So you’ve been here before, have you, Leo? Well, then. We can consider you experienced.”

Leo has never thought of blood poisoning as “experience,” a kind of war wound.

But he’d never know about R & R because he’d go to grad school after college; Lenny would get married before the law was changed, disqualifying him for service. And Larry—Lucky Larry they would call him—would draw a safe number when a draft lottery became necessary for Vietnam, where friends they’d grown up with would die.

Waiting for the bus outside the hospital, Leo is struck by a new thought—maybe Mrs. Ogilvie meant he was “experienced” only because he’d been to the ER and was familiar with the hospital.

Either way, he didn’t want to think about it. ✧

Claude Clayton Smith is the author of eight books and coeditor/translator of two others, most recently MEDITATIONS After the Bear Feast: The Poetic Dialogues of N. Scott Momaday and Yuri Vaella (Shanti Arts, 2016). Momaday is currently being filmed for the PBS American Masters series, to be aired in 2018.

Alopecia Areata

When alopecia areata develops, the body attacks its own hair follicles.

—American Academy
of Dermatology

It is not the first spot,
smooth like a morning lake
or the hair like dispersing fog.

It is not the other spots
that slowly pool together
or the hand reaching down.

It is not the finger that first
touches the inviolate surface
or the skull slick like fish.

It is not the doctor like a heron,
arched, piercing the surface
between the bulrushes.

It is not the other children
with shouted nicknames
like the cackles of water birds.

Bald eagle. It plummets
to the water, white head
shattering into white spray.

By Will Justice Drake

Will Justice Drake lives in south Alabama. He was a finalist for the 2016 NC State Poetry Contest, judged by Yusef Komunyakaa. His work has appeared in Negative Capability and Raleigh Review and is forthcoming in Bellum. He received his MFA from North Carolina State University.

Guide to Nether-Land

Drive across a spongy patch of pink replete
with thick forests of nipple trees on the upper surface
of the tongue—giving it a gutted feel—while
leaving behind the old amphitheater
of incisors, molars, enamel *lamin-*
ated arcs of hushed milkiness, and the red
buccal skies that have grown cloudy
with tormented cones of breath.

*Then STOP—
at the traffic light
and adjust your rearview mirror.*

Proceed, then, via the Express lane
to the neck's flappy turnstile—the *epi-*
glottis—pay your toll,
then power on your cruise control for a joy ride
down Interstate Esophagus.

Be sure to notice, on both sides,
the fingerling folds of plump muscles motioning
to one another in swift peristalsis, the webbed
overhang of capillaries, the odd variety of blood cells
cartwheeling and the stashed pylons of veins
dimpling and rising across pinked lobes of lungs.

*NOTE: You may experience significant delays
due to food traffic ahead of you. Please
be patient and slow down before the sharp turn into
the Stomach. And, as always, NO HONKING.*

When you enter the fundus, switch gears to “L”
or the lowest alternate transmission to prevent
the car from overheating as you drive
through the downy ridges underlying the stomach rugae.
Expect thundershowers and bursts of acid
rain. Look at all the fields crowded with whirring turbines.
Notice the notches in the distance, the isthmuses, atolls—until
you reach the final rest stop in Digestion State, the pyloric orifice.

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Take a restroom break. Collect your chyme. Then drive South to the Absorption State—the *Small Intestine (SI)*. At the first “C” of the SI highway—the Duodenum—yield to the incoming traffic of bile salts, digestive enzymes, vans of mucus, then merge left—onto the speeding lane. Expect significant turbulence. The grounds will turn alkaline. The sky, protrusive, with vertiginous villi. Hold on to the steering wheel firmly—*no texting please*—and stay focused on the road. In about 10 inches, merge onto Interstate Jejunum.

Stay on Interstate Jejunum for 8.2 feet.

Notice the sudden change in topography—a plethora of rugged hills, more expansive villi, patent valves of Kerckring projecting from the sky. An odd helter-skelter of suction cups knobbed along the freeway through which sugars and amino acids gain entry.

Get off on Exit 51 to get gas. Use the restroom if you need to, then merge onto I-Ileum South.

Stay on I-Ileum South for 11 feet. At the fork, make a sharp right turn and follow signs to the CCR [Cecum, Colon, Rectum] Tunnel.

This CCR tunnel marks the final stretch—arched at 5 feet length; one-way traffic on the toll road ending at the bowl of Rectum. A nudge of pressure there, then an exchange of cents, pleasantries, until you see signs that say *Welcome to Nether-Land*—when, you should slow down the car, roll up the windows, and prepare to make the final exit.

By Tanmoy Das Lala

Tanmoy Das Lala resides in New York City with his partner, Eric, and a small pea plant. His poems have appeared in several online journals.

The Wolf

By Rebecca Taksel

You blame it on the drinking. Everything an alcoholic does is alcoholic, isn't that so? We shake our heads, we identify lists of alcoholic behaviors.

Joey was a self-confessed alcoholic, incorrigible, even proud. If you wanted to spend time with him, you didn't dare lecture him. During the week he worked, ran six miles a day, did a hundred situps, ate a spare, vegan diet. Saturday morning, after his run, he began to ease the caps off bottles of Becks, drinking the beers down fast but smoothly, no chugging. If the weather was decent, he'd get on his motorcycle at noon and begin his rounds of the bars. He ate veggie dogs and fries at the bars, made fabulous vegan treats for the rest of the two-day drunk.

If Liz and I wanted to see our brother, we had to meet him on Saturdays. For years his patterns remained the same, the weekend's drinking taking him through predictable phases of heightened insight and humor, silliness, sentimentality, occasional hostility.

Then the pattern began to bleed around the edges. The silliness became nonsense, the hostility spiraled into rage. He'd pick a fight with us, chase us away, call later to apologize.

He began to complain about his health, first one thing, then another. He wouldn't go to a doctor. Eyesight, memory, nightmares. He was in late middle age and drinking himself into insensibility. What could he expect?

He lost his looks. Into his sixties he was impossibly youthful and handsome,

thanks in some part to his diet and exercise. One Saturday we saw him coming toward us outside one of the bars where we met him, and he was old, just like that. We asked him about his running. "I don't run anymore," he said with a sad half-smile. We were afraid to pursue it. Later I probably said to Liz that alcoholism is a progressive disease and even the running would fall prey to it. Sooner or later ... In Joey's case everything was later, but what could you expect?

He complained again about his memory. What could he expect? He caused scenes in bars. Bartenders and servers who had put up with him because he was usually nice and was a very big tipper, besides, finally got fed up. Everyone gets fed up eventually, right? He and I had already had long periods of estrangement. I was prepared never to see him again. He'd insulted me once too often, and he was bent on destroying himself. What can you do?

The police didn't catch him for drunk driving, but his huge Harley fell on him a couple of times. He quit his job, suddenly, after raging about it for months. He told us he was sure he had dementia. Then he withdrew from us completely. We tried to talk to him by phone, but we could feel him drifting away on the other side of the line. We worried, we consulted his girlfriend, who lived in California. They spoke by phone every day; she was worried, too. He reported strange

symptoms: couldn't sleep, could only sleep. He was moving to Hawaii, sold his car and his bike. He was silent on the phone for long minutes when his girlfriend called. A few moments of clarity, then gibberish, then silence again.

Liz finally said we had to go to his house, get him to a hospital. We were afraid, what if he became violent? We found him curled up on his couch. When Liz said he had to go to the hospital, he roused himself to throw one shoe, but then he was docile. A very kind woman firefighter helped to coax him into the ambulance.

The diagnosis came within less than an hour: an enormous tumor in his brain, almost certainly a glioblastoma. But the surgeons held out the possibility that it was benign, a meningioma, and we reluctantly approved biopsy and surgery. Finally we found out that the thing was an oligodendroglioma, that it had been growing for a long time, probably several years, fingers of malignancy reaching deeper and deeper.

Joey died a month after he went into the hospital. The boy who cried wolf. At the end, we cried and cried out to the wolf himself, who had taken our brother. ✧

Rebecca Taksel lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She was contributing editor of the Redwood Coast Review, where her cultural criticism and personal essays appeared regularly. Her poems and essays have been published in anthologies and periodicals.

“Joey was a self-confessed alcoholic, incorrigible, even proud. If you wanted to spend time with him, you didn't dare lecture him.”

Life Support

Two sisters in the doorway
of their mother's room, ashen
in the ICU's brash fluorescence.
Doctor's words hover halfway
between ceiling and floor
like last week's balloons:
organ failure, ventilator, comfort care.
The sisters lean toward each other
until one's shoulder presses
the other's. One stares at the pocket
of the doctor's white coat, the other
at the flecked linoleum floor.
I watch and wonder if their mother
ever made them sit facing each other
when they argued, like we had to,
kneecap to kneecap in child-sized chairs,
to prepare them for this moment
when they would need to hold
each other up.

By Lindsay Rutherford

Lindsay Rutherford lives and writes in Edmonds, Washington. When she is not writing, she works as a physical therapist at a local hospital. Her work has appeared in Poplorish.

Tuesday Mermaids

It's Tuesday, and so slow,
Van Morrison on the loudspeaker
sings us in, la-te da.
A graying array of urban
wildebeests, we are the ones
the lions single out—easy meat.
One hunkers over a walker,
one hobbles in on a cane, some
stride on their own muscle and steam.
We head to the umbrella-ringed cove,
drag our own particular
bags of afflictions behind us,
cling to the ladder, lower ourselves in.
Our suited breasts break the surface,
make wobbled ledges.

Immersion takes us like a sacrament.
Baptized sleek and young, we slip
beyond our limits—
freestyle mermaids,
lost in easy stroke
beneath the glide,
now we are sylphs,
the water our air—
flickering ripples,
edged with light.

Like lilies plucked,
our grace deflates
when we emerge,
gather our bones
and go. We hear the cool hum
of autumn. *We know.*
But here, waterdiamonds
beaded to our skin,
see how our August beauty
breaks the heart of summer.

By Connie Zumpf

Connie Zumpf is a longtime member of the Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver, Colorado, where she recently completed her first poetry manuscript as part of the Poetry Book Project. Her poems often reflect themes of impermanence, spirituality, and aging and have appeared or are forthcoming in Pilgrimage Magazine and The Christian Century.

Transition

By Vernita Hall

*Nothing is permanent
except change.*

—Heraclitus

1

When the phone rings at six a.m. on a Friday morning, the ringtone is dread—the toll exacted by years of being on call. Computer problems announce themselves by a blaring Blackberry, perversely jarring you from dreams in the dark early hours. But this time it was not the electronic leash that jangled, and not a server that was failing.

“In the hospital? Early this morning? Right. I’ll pick you up.”

Struggling for calm, I mentally itemized tasks. I phoned the office and left a message for my boss of three weeks that I would be out that day. The deadline for his critical project might have to be backburned. *That’ll make a great first impression.*

I threw on clothes, ran a comb through my hair, dabbed on lipstick. From the office adjacent to the bedroom I retrieved a form from a filing cabinet and my phone book. I returned to the bedroom, sat on the bed, and riffled to the page I had last used ten years ago.

Buried beside me under the comforter, a large mound stirred. It spoke sleepily.

“Babe, what are you doing?”

“It’s Granny. The nursing home sent her to the hospital. I’m going to get Mom.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll find out when I get there.”

“What are you doing still here?”

Answering your questions. Fighting the curtain of anger drawing across my voice, I clicked back into the cool logic of logistics.

“I needed a living will form. I’ll go through it with Mom and get it filed at the hospital. And the phone number of the undertaker we used for Pop.”

“You don’t know that yet. You’ve got to have faith, Baby.”

“She’s ninety-nine. I’ve been waiting for this call.”

Stephen was silent for a moment.

“There’s a big wasp nest on the side of the house. Paper wasps.”

“What? Where?”

“High up on the third floor. Facing the yard. You can see it from the street.”

The curtain of anger ripped loose. “Why on earth would you pick this particular moment to tell me that?”

“I just saw it. I thought you’d want to know.”

I collected the papers and left. Some news I could live my whole life without knowing.

2

At Einstein’s Emergency, in a small examining room adjacent to the nurse’s station, Granny lay wide-eyed, a petite form swaddled in white sheets. A cold from the previous week had left her weakened. A persistent shallow cough roiled the congested chest, but she lacked strength to expel the phlegm. Her thin breathing sounded as if she were slowly strangling.

Doctors and nurses rotated through. We informed the staff of our family’s DNR decision and passed on the living will directive. There was the inevitable attachment to monitors and blood drawing. With each new assault Granny would loudly bleat “Momma!” like a lost goat kid, as if separation from that parent had not occurred some sixty years prior. As we waited, the penetrating cold and silence felt like a wake in a tomb. We requested more blankets.

They needed to test her urine. They would have to catheterize her.

How do they stand it, hospital workers—the routine infliction of pain on the uncomprehending infirm, the helpless. *Let them hurt you. I will not prevent it. But trust me. Know that I love you. This pain will not last long. Nothing ever does.* The gray-filmed eyes fixed on my face, inches from hers, one gnarled hand vised my arm, and even though the face grimaced and the swollen fingers dug fiercely into my flesh, the toothless mouth did not cry out. Granny was declaring her own living will.

They finally finished. They would keep her for observation. They wheeled her upstairs. After seeing her installed and at peace, we departed.

3

The television in Granny’s room was playing a western. A herd of high-spirited, stampeding horses was galloping across the screen on a sage-brushed, rock-strewn plain, the prairie sun brimming overhead, hoofbeats and

Continued, next page

a fiddle softly audible.

A young nurse was reading her temperature. Granny smiled in recognition as Mom and I approached. "Hi, baby," she greeted our concurrent kisses on opposite cheeks.

Mom busied herself rearranging the room, inspecting Granny's body and clothes, and interrogating the nurse. I wondered if someday I might have to step into my mother's shoes. Could I follow such an example of strength and devotion as well if she were the patient? I clutched my grandmother's hand.

"How do you feel today, Granny?"

"I'm good. You all set me up good with everything. Thank you for that."

Mom and I stared at each other in astonishment. Such lucid speech was rare now. Granny continued animatedly.

"All the wild horses are free. They can go anywhere they want to. Yeah, honey. They free now. All those horses you see are free."

"Mom, do you hear her? She can see the television and the horses. She understands what she's seeing." Mom nodded, grinning.

Granny turned to me, staring straight into my eyes. "God gave you the freedom. You free now. God set you free."

My eyes rapidly filled and overflowed. Shocked by her words, I sat on the bed, shaking my head in disbelief. "Mom, how does she know? She's talking about my new job. But how could she possibly know?"

Mom bent close to her mother's ear, speaking slowly. "Granny, are you free?"

"Yeah. I thought this was gone happen. Free." She squeezed my hand tightly. "Y'all free to go anywhere you

want to go. You free now. Free. Now. Thank God for that."

On so many languorous Sunday afternoons of my bangs-with-braids days, Mom and I would sequester ourselves in Granny's bedroom, the elder mother-daughter pair rummaging through chests of stuffed drawers packed with sundry treasures: hatpins crowned with tears of pearls, sparkling rhinestone brooches, a hand-beaded drawstring purse, squares of sassy flowered silk scarves and modest black lace church veils, a mid-arm-length pair of petal-soft white dress cotton gloves. Some item or other never failed to change hands. They would lie on the bed and clip coupons from the newspaper, marking sales for future shopping trips. From a closet Granny would excavate for me glass gallon jars of hoarded coppers. Spread-eagle on the cool linoleum floor, I would craft, as fluid as sand mandalas, penny pictures of horses, birds, or human faces that watched the relentless circling of slim brass fingers around the face of a wooden clock perched on the claw-footed oak dresser, chiming the loss of the quarter hour and those liquid years.

As twilight mantled the curtained windows, quiet draped the hospital room. Together the three of us watched the quickened television images: sleek brown bodies, manes and tails streaming, as they swiftly climbed a rise and vanished over the other side, leaving behind only the flagging echoes of their hooves and evanescent eddies of swirled dust to mark where they, too, had once passed, for the fleetest of moments.

4

For her one hundredth birthday, Granny's family gathered neigh-

"Her petite frame robed in a blue topaz silk dress blooming with amethyst orchids crowning leafy emerald stems, she held court from her wheelchair at the head of the table, bewigged, lipsticked, ruby nails sparkling, pearled, diapered, rouged. Briefly lifted was the hazy Alzheimer's cloud."

bors with balloons, cake, and sandwiches in a small dining room of the nursing home where she had taken up residence the year before. Her petite frame robed in a blue topaz silk dress blooming with amethyst orchids crowning leafy emerald stems, she held court from her wheelchair at the head of the table, bewigged, lipsticked, ruby nails sparkling, pearled, diapered, rouged. Briefly lifted was the hazy Alzheimer's cloud. The cataract-dimmed eyes gifted us with recognition of all her courtiers attendant, as on so many years of Mother's Day celebrations in her home, stretching back into the shroud of memory.

Tribute to the centenarian from the first black president of the United States highlighted the commemoration. In light of the historic coincidence of two such rare events, the White House had been flooded with requests for similar letters of congratulations. Our letter had taken weeks to arrive.

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Perhaps centenarians are not such a dying breed, after all.

Copies were distributed to her family: the remaining eldest son, three daughters, and their progeny. Five generations of descendants—over forty in all—owed their breath to a fourth-grade-educated, Virginia-born, Hershey Kiss-brown woman barely five feet tall who had scrimped during the Great Depression, sweated in factories during the Great War, joined opportunity-hungry southern blacks in the swarming migrations north to do day's work; her seed, her heirs apparent, now witnessing the inexorable workings of the end of these days.

5

Over the course of a weekend I packed, scrubbed, and moved into my new sixth-floor cubicle. This promotion, after twenty-nine years of employment, was unexpected. I had been anticipating my retirement at thirty years, but the opportunity for an immediate career change to my chosen new profession—writing—presented itself. Now, instead of being a member of a behind-the-scenes technical team one floor below, responsible for server and storage administration, on call 24-7, and tethered to a BlackBerry, I had now become the Senior Technical Writer of our department, a daytime-only consultant-scribe-editor to the entire organization. I was relieved of two a.m. Sunday morning maintenance shifts and frequent forced overtime without pay, sprung from the twenty-first-century rat race, the revolving treadmill of trying to

keep current with the relentlessly rapid pace of ever-changing technology. I was paroled from pager prison. I was starting over. I was free.

Ironically, I now sat two cubes from where I had begun my career. Through my new windows I had the same westward vista—the tracks of Septa's Regional Rail lines, their trains ceaselessly ferrying passengers; the Temple campus with its rivers of streaming students; the overhead soaring of red-tailed hawks that had successfully re-integrated the Philadelphia environs and were nesting nearby in a window ledge at the Franklin Institute; the brilliant crimson flaming of late afternoon sun drawing harried days to a majestic close. Staring through the blinds of those familiar panes from my new mew, I could almost sense the hawk's glee as she orbited confidently, gyring in slow cycles like the flight of time, and imagined that I could feel the breeze from her powerful wing strokes caressing my cheeks, lifting me heavenward with her.

6

Returning home one evening, not long after my ascension, Stephen greeted me with proud tidings. He had exorcised the paper wasp nest and burned it, only to discover that there were no longer any wasps within the pocked shell. Mere scorched fragments of the empty gray husk remained on the yard's grass, tumbling backward and forward in the autumn wind. At the end of its season, in the natural order of things, the life within it had already moved on. ✧

Author's note, page 30

Admissions

People stay with you.
No matter how brief
the moment
we share
what is tangible.
A crumpled candy wrapper
on the floor,
a dropped address book,
a grey sweatshirt,
a tissue, a romance novel,
a lifesaver,
all collect themselves
in this small office
as we sit waiting for oncology
to send someone over
with more paperwork.

By Kathryn Eberly

Kathryn Eberly is a poet who has been published in various small presses and anthologies and has poetry forthcoming in Hospital Drive, an online magazine. She worked for the Human Services Agency in San Francisco for over twenty years and now resides in Bangor, Maine.

The Vote

Glazed eyes like egg whites
Freshly cracked
Into a porcelain bowl with one crimson apple—
The tongue rolls on crackling leaves
His white shirt stained with blood
Or maybe wine.
His face is heavy.

Just below the left eye,
His daughter's peer back at me—
A hot blacktop on a summer day,
Eyelashes beating in tune
To double dutch.

I like coffee I like tea
I like the boys and the boys like me
... Did he nod?

She spoons him applesauce and I notice she isn't crying.
The ears seem small, of an alien child
Making patterns with bright colored paper
On a tablecloth draped over high cheekbones

Yes No Maybe So
Yes No Maybe So

Gauze swaddled hands like boxing gloves
Too heavy to counter—
The dirt silence caught in new cotton batting
Suffocates words not spoken

The committee votes No.

Mister, your life has been difficult
We see you are very loved —

I'm sorry we said No.

By Alisa Olmsted*

* Author's note, page 24

HEALTH & HEALING IN HONDURAS



VCU Physicians and Trainees Provide Continued Global Health Outreach



Working on a clean water project, La Hicaca, Honduras.

Photos and text by Michael P. Stevens, MD, and Nadia Masroor

Virginia Commonwealth University's Global Health and Health Disparities Program (GH2DP) has a tripartite focus on service to underserved communities, education, and research that bolsters our health and education missions. Our principle health outreach site is in the Hicaca Sector of rural Honduras. We work closely with community partners in this region to address critical health issues via longitudinal public health projects and direct clinical care. Our most recent health outreach trip took place from June 2 to June 11, 2017.

HEALTH & HEALING IN HONDURAS



TOP: Medicine clinic in La Hacaca, Honduras.

RIGHT: Teaching in the medicine clinic in Lomitas, Honduras.



HEALTH & HEALING IN HONDURAS



LEFT: Microbiology lab, La Hicaca, Honduras.

BOTTOM: Dr. Ana Sanchez teaches in the medicine clinic in La Hicaca, Honduras.



HEALTH & HEALING IN HONDURAS



Patient care at the medicine clinic in La Hicaca, Honduras.



VCU's GH2DP health outreach group in La Hicaca, Honduras, June 2017.

Lamentation of a Night-Shift Nurse

Wrinkled hands grasp
my own, and her eyes

search every part
of my face for
answers that are

just not there.
Her mouth gapes,
and for three days

her failing lungs
can only exhale
help me.

There is no way to make
her understand that we have

done everything possible,

and I wish I
could save her.

Instead I do
the only thing
I can—

hold her cooling
hands and hum the song
my mother would use

to soothe me to sleep when

I was scared as
a child. And

I hope that when
she faces death,
my touch and

a hummed melody
will be enough

to make her
brave.

By Mallory Drake

Mallory Drake is a registered nurse who has worked in oncology, hematology, gerontology, and palliative care in both North Carolina and Alabama. She currently lives on the Gulf Coast.

Blues from the Stepdown Ward

By Terry Sanville

I think it was nighttime when they moved me out of the ICU. I stared up at overhead air conditioning vents slipping past. My gurney turned into a huge, dark room. Two nurses slid me onto a bed near the far wall, hung IVs, handed me the call button with the TV controls, then vanished. Golden light filtered in from the hallway. The ward was quiet, the first silence I'd enjoyed in a week. At least, I thought I'd been there that long.

The sheets quickly became sodden with my sweat. The nurses said I had a fever from an infection of the surgical incision in my gut. The doctor had been called. I waited for him in the darkness, trying to focus on something other than recent events that landed me in the hospital. But those images proved too vivid: vomiting clotted blood all over our kitchen, bleeding out from a huge stomach ulcer. There'd been no warning. If it wasn't for my wife's quick actions, if I lived alone, I'd be dead.

I wiped sweat from my eyes, clicked on the TV and surfed the channels. On some public station two guys clutched acoustic guitars and sang old-style blues. I recognized the songs as those written by Robert Johnson and one of the guitarists as Eric Clapton. I studied his hands, listened to the sweet blue notes, and sang along. The music seemed to meld with my fever and for a few moments I was sitting on a stool next to Eric, watching him play and plunking along on my L-4 Gibson. Then the lights blinked on.

"I recognized the songs as those written by Robert Johnson and one of the guitarists as Eric Clapton. I studied his hands, listened to the sweet blue notes, and sang along. The music seemed to meld with my fever and for a few moments I was sitting on a stool next to Eric, watching him play and plunking along on my L-4 Gibson."

"Ya know why they call him 'slow hand?'" my surgeon asked, motioning to the TV. He was a short, stocky Asian man who spoke without an accent.

"You mean Clapton?" I answered. "I've heard that nickname but could never figure it out 'cause a lot of his playing is really fast."

"You're right. But he takes time to add just the right touch to each note he plays."

The surgeon leaned over me and stripped away the square white bandage covering my stomach wound. I groaned as the tape pulled up hair and skin, focused on the TV, and watched Eric's fingers, trying to memorize what I saw. This doc was definitely no "slow hand" physician.

"Your incision is infected," the doctor pronounced. "Got to open it up and let it drain."

"You gonna do that here?" I asked. "You gonna give me something to knock me out?"

"Won't take but a minute," he answered in a soft voice and reached for a device to remove the surgical staples. "This part shouldn't hurt."

Removing the staples from the five-

inch incision actually tickled. I stared at the TV as Clapton and his partner began the introduction to Johnson's "Crossroad Blues."

"Okay, now, on the count of three I'm going to open the wound." The surgeon placed a thumb flat against my stomach, on either side of the vertical incision, and drew the skin tight. I began to softly sing along with Eric.

"I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees."

"One."

"Went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees."

"Two."

"Asked the Lord above have mercy, save poor Terry, if you please."

"Three."

I grunted, held my breath, and felt the barely-knit skin pull apart and the wound open up. Blood and pus flowed down my lower abdomen.

Continued, next page

Continued from page 20

"Standing at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride."

"I'll be done in just a minute," the doctor said and quickly dabbed at the drainage with a sterile dressing. "You did great, a real trooper."

"Standing at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride."

He wadded up a piece of gauze and poked around in the inch-deep incision. I waited for my guts to come popping out, but they mercifully stayed put.

"Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by."

"That's one of my favorite blues songs," the doctor said and stepped back, stripping bloodied latex gloves from his hands. "The nurse will be in to redress the wound. Rest easy and enjoy the music."

I continued staring at the television, not wanting to look anywhere else. I felt like I'd just been in a knife fight and was laid out on the hard plank floor of some Southern juke joint. Black people stare down at me as the band plays on. The place smells of sweat and reefer. In one corner a slender, full-lipped mulatto wipes his jackknife on an immaculately white handkerchief and slips it into a vest pocket. A lit cigarette precariously dangles from his mouth. A golden-skinned woman sits on his lap and nuzzles his neck. He grins at me and sings along with the band.

"Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin'

sun goin' down

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee, eee, risin' sun goin' down

I believe to my soul, now, poor Terry is sinkin' down."

A heavy-set black woman with a stethoscope draped around her neck stood over me and stared at the surgeon's handiwork. She tsked to herself and poked at my incision with a gloved finger.

"Looks clean, nice and red. That'll heal up fine once we get the infection under control." She hung an IV bag of Cipro on the stand, tied a tourniquet below the elbow of my right arm and went searching for a vein, finding one on the third poke. I focused on the TV and continued to sing along with Eric and the boys.

"And I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west

I went to the crossroad, baby, I looked east and west

Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh well, babe, in my distress."

"What's that you're singing?" the nurse asks. "Sounds like somethin' my Grandpa would know." From a needless syringe she dribbled a clear liquid into my open wound and swabbed it out with gauze. I groaned and drew deep whistling breaths through clenched teeth. The nurse was quick and efficient. She placed four-by-fours and a new white dressing over the incision and taped it down.

"You're not from the Delta, are you?" I finally asked, breathing hard.

"You mean Mississippi? Lord no, born right here in Los Angeles. But my grandparents sharecropped outside of

Clarksdale, years before the war."

"Yeah, well, that song was recorded in 1936."

"I don't pay much attention to old blues music. But I sing gospel in church."

"Close enough."

"Yes, but in church, we sing to rejoice and praise the Lord, not to complain about losing a woman, or some such notion."

"For me, singing sweet blues is the same as rejoicing—just a different way of doing it ... helps me know what I'm feeling is real."

The nurse stared at me for a long moment and nodded. "Yes, I can see that. If I had a hole in my belly, I'd probably be doing the same." She chuckled and turned to leave, humming. Her deep contralto voice blended perfectly with the tinny sounds coming from the two white men singing on television.

Sometime after midnight my fever broke. I drifted off to sleep and dreamed about singing with long-dead blues men, learning even more lessons about suffering and rejoicing, learning till my fingers felt thick and full with all of it. ✧

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and one skittery cat (his in-house critic). He writes full-time, producing short stories, essays, poems, and novels. Since 2005 his short stories have been accepted by more than 250 literary and commercial journals, magazines, and anthologies, including The Potomac Review, The Bitter Oleander, Shenandoah, and The Saturday Evening Post. He was nominated twice for Pushcart Prizes for his stories "The Sweeper" and "The Garage." Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Nectarines

Today she misses nectarines,
though she can't quite remember
their name. She can still feel
how one filled her small hands.
Sphere of summer luck, sunrise-
smooth skin, a prayer
pressed to pliant lips.
The flash of anticipation
lighting her fingers on fire.
She couldn't hold the whole sun
at once. The bite, teeth
piercing skin, liberating
all that light.
Sweet mess of flesh!
Golden rivers of juice
carving channels
down her dusty chin,
pooling in her palms,
tickling her tanned arms.

Today she sits in a bed
that is not hers,
skin hanging from a body
she doesn't recognize.
Stiff sheets, small window,
blue sky like a phantom limb,
lazy shuffle of maple leaves
a dull ache.
It must be July.
She sucks at her gums,
tongues a memory
of the stone,
ridges and grooves
sucked clean and spit
into the bushes.

By Lindsay Rutherford*

* Author's note, page 9

Alzheimer's

The elm empties itself of everything,
but the wind pulses the branches as if
something were there, not just dry sticks
against the sky, shadows slipping through
their fingers, and darkness and a few stars.
When the wind stills, the pauses lengthen,
waiting for morning, which is painfully blue,
the clouds having drifted away
during the night's slow hours.

By Jack Stewart

Jack Stewart was educated at the University of Alabama and Emory University. From 1992–95 he was a Brittain Fellow at The Georgia Institute of Technology. His work has appeared in Poetry, Image, The American Literary Review, The Dark Horse Review, The Southern Humanities Review, and other journals and anthologies, most recently in A New Ulster. He lives in south Florida, where he teaches at Pine Crest School.

Ohio Wildflowers



Photo by Alisa Olmsted

Digital print from 35mm black and white film negative.

Alisa Olmsted is an amateur poet and fourth-year medical student who writes to help articulate life. She studied studio art and neuroscience as an undergraduate and continued on to pursue medicine when she realized that its basic humanism allowed her to cultivate the balance between arts and sciences in a way she always craved. Writing became a tool to help her explore how life, health, and healing collide. She currently plans to pursue psychiatry.

On the Anniversary of Your Diagnosis

Be the pioneer who hiked twenty miles with no food
other than a biscuit, with no shoes other than worn-out
moccasins to a high glacier where his feet grew bloody
from ice—this was 1845—

and yet he found a passage through the mountains.

Be the horse with a broken leg who raced again.

Be the mountaineer left for dead in South America
who climbed in darkness with a fractured leg
out of a crevasse, then crawled six miles to camp.

Be the woman who swam the English Channel.

Be the little boy lost on a Cascade mountain for three days
who wondered, upon being found, why his rescuers had worried.

Be the young woman who lived for a year
atop a two-hundred-foot-tall Coast Redwood.

Be the baby bird my friend found injured—
nourished by human hands, a fledgling, then released.

Be the willow that should, by all accounts, collapse
into the river, and yet thrives by the force of its roots.

By Christine Colasurdo

Christine Colasurdo is the author of Return to Spirit Lake: Life and Landscape at Mount St. Helens and The Golden Gate National Parks: A Photographic Journey. She is also the author of the poetry chapbook RAIN: A Song Cycle. She has published widely as a writer and calligrapher. She teaches creative writing and calligraphy at the Multnomah Arts Center in Portland, Oregon. Visit www.christinecolasurdo.com to order one of her books.

I know you're there

the signs are clear—
tiny brown pellets along the wall
and in the cupboard just below
a hole chewed in the cereal.
There's a basement leak,

an attic creak, a lump
like a bullet in my breast,
something in the air—

A clutch in the gut,
thump in the night,
and a cold blue egg
blooming
just behind my eyes.

I lock the doors
plug the holes
eat my kale and walk

10,000 steps a day
along a careful, certain path—
but there must be cracks
I've overlooked,
soft spots in the floor

right over these realms
of mischief just beneath
my life

where no flashlight beam
will ever reach,
and where I can see nothing
of what creeps in
on silent feet.

By **Connie Zumpf***

* Author's note, page 10

Eating Octopus

By Judith Gille

My ninety-year-old mother-in-law Maxine is scheduled for brain surgery next week, and even the neurosurgeon is having difficulty predicting the outcome. My husband left town earlier in the week to plant fruit trees at his farm on Lopez Island, so when his youngest brother flies in from Texas to visit their mother, it is up to me to entertain Andy and calm Maxine's fears about her upcoming surgery. My brother-in-law, a true gourmand, talks nonstop about food and is determined to try one or two of Seattle's many new restaurants while here. We make a plan to take Maxine out for what could be her "Last Supper." I suggest the Omega Ouzeri, a Greek restaurant that recently opened on the street below my Seattle condo. They specialize in seafood and Andy loves eating things that once swam in the sea.

2.

While living in France years ago, I learned the distinction between *un gourmet* who is a connoisseur of fine food, and *un gourmand*, a lover of food in general. My brother-in-law definitely falls into the latter category. Like my Uncle Harry, who once said, "I'll eat anything that moves," Andy is from Texas. I don't know if this is a trait of Texans in general, but I do know Andy has paid dearly for his food obsession more than once when our families were traveling together in Mexico.

3.

The week before Andy arrives, my mother-in-law discovers that the mortality rate for neurosurgery patients is not 3 percent like she thought. "It's 5 percent!" she exclaims, as if the neurosurgeon was trying to pull one over on her. I remind Maxine that she still has a 95 percent chance of survival. "I think you'll make it through the surgery just fine," I tell her, "but at your age recovery could be challenging." (Actually, I might have said "hell.")

4.

Maxine could be a poster child for modern medical interventions. When she was a child she had radiation treatments for a severe ear infection that almost killed her. At age forty-five she had a hysterectomy, at age sixty-eight she got two bunionectomies, at age seventy-five she got a cochlear implant, at seventy-eight a bladder saddle, at eighty-two she had a pacemaker installed, and at age eighty-eight a hip replacement. At eighty-nine she had all of her teeth recapped for cosmetic reasons. Now she's having a benign tumor removed from her brain.

5.

Rain is coming down in sheets the night we plan to dine at Omega Ouzeri, but it is Andy's last night in Seattle and his heart is set on dining out. He asks his mother if she would rather stay at her retirement home for dinner, but she wants to come along. Being nearly paralyzed on her left-side (hence the need to remove the tumor thought to

"I suggest the Omega Ouzeri, a Greek restaurant that recently opened on the street below my Seattle condo. They specialize in seafood and Andy loves eating things that once swam in the sea."

be causing the paralysis), it takes a Herculean effort on Andy's part to get her up and out of her apartment, down the elevator, through the Fred Lind Manor Retirement Home, and out to where I'm parked in the back alley. All of us get drenched as we struggle to get her and the walker she needs to get around into my Honda Fit. When we arrive at the restaurant, the whole routine is reversed. We are drenched all over again.

6.

We are sitting in the Omega, our clothes soggy and hair matted to our heads, studying the menu. Maxine is slumped on the bench seat across from Andy and me, complaining about the noise even though there is no one else in the restaurant on this evil-weathered night. Everyone else had the good sense to stay home.

7.

My mother-in-law gave birth to seven children in ten years and blames her ex-husband for this surplus of children.

Continued, next page

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Her five sons and two daughters could be described, at best, as ambivalent toward their mother. When feeling generous, some of them will describe her as narcissistic and their upbringing as one of benign neglect. Others of them are not so nice. As with many families, the history of blame and recrimination has yet to be broken: Maxine held a deep grudge toward her own mother who held a grudge toward her mother, too. I once asked my mother-in-law why she'd declined to visit her own mother when she knew she was dying, and she said, "I had no interest in seeing that old bitch." I've declined to ask about their relationship since.

8.

At Omega, we settle on a small-plate seafood extravaganza. We order oysters; a plate of mussels in a broth of butter, garlic and white wine; and smoked trout. "How 'bout a little octopus?" Andy says, ogling a long white tentacle with dark red suction cups packed in ice at a nearby serving station. I cringe and shake my head. I don't like the idea of eating an octopus any more than I like the idea of eating whale or dolphin meat. The last time I ate octopus was forty years ago.

9.

Octopuses are cephalopod mollusks

with eight suckered arms, a soft sac of a body, and sharp, beak-like jaws. While orangey-brown is the color most commonly associated with octopuses, they have special pigment cells called chromatophores in their skin that connect

"Paul, an octopus with the same name as my husband, lived at the Oberhaven Aquarium in West Germany until he died last year. He could predict the outcome of World Cup soccer matches more reliably than the bookies."

to their nervous systems, allowing them to change color and pattern to match their environments or warn off predators. The extremely venomous blue-ringed octopus (*Hapalochlaena lunulata*), changes from deep blue to an eyeball-busting yellow with blue rings when threatened. My uneasiness about eating octopus, however, isn't because I'm afraid it might be poisonous or because they can change color so adeptly. I'm hesitant about eating a creature that is believed to be the most intelligent of all invertebrate species. Paul, an octopus with the same name as my husband, lived at the Oberhaven Aquarium in West Germany until he died last year. He could predict the outcome of World Cup soccer matches more reliably than the bookies. The eight-armed oracle went eight for eight in his 2010 prognostications.

10.

Alone at her apartment, prior to the surgery, Maxine tearfully shares with me her fear that her children will never absolve her of her maternal shortcomings and that she too will end up dying alone. All I can think of to do is

share a few Buddhist principles with her. I sound a bit lame, even to myself, as I talk about things like forgiveness and not judging ourselves or others too harshly and am relieved when she cuts me off. "Science is my religion," she says firmly. She has told me this many times. Once again, she's betting science, or at least the modern medical establishment, will save her.

11.

Maxine's primary care physician counseled against the surgery, but my Paul and I find this out too late. We are sitting in a small consulting room at Virginia Mason Hospital waiting for Dr. Lee, the neurosurgeon, to arrive and give us news of how the removal of the meningioma went. From the little Maxine has told us, I'm expecting a skinny, older Chinese guy wearing wire-rimmed glasses and dressed in a white lab coat. My preconceived notions about neurosurgeons are blown out of the water when a husky, exhausted-looking, long-haired millennial in wrinkled green surgical scrubs comes in and casually throws himself into an upholstered chair facing us. Dr. Lee shakes our hands. "It pretty much went as expected," he announces with a yawn. "Except that we couldn't get all of it."

12.

In addition to predicting soccer matches, octopuses use tools, solve problems, and can find their way through mazes, which is more than you can say for some humans. They are good mimics and can ape the behaviors of other species. Like ravens,

Continued, next page

they are drawn to shiny objects. They build fortresses out of shells and other objects they find. This is what “The Octopus’s Garden,” the only song Ringo Starr ever wrote, was about. That, and the infighting going on between members of the world’s most famous rock band.

13.

After our meeting with Dr. Lee, my husband and I head up to intensive care to see Maxine. My mother-in-law has always been a coquettish beauty; think Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly. She had round blue eyes, high cheekbones, clear skin, perfect teeth, and a delicate, turned-up nose. Now, laying in the hospital bed with a shaven head and ninety over-sized staples holding her blood-caked, carved-up head together, she looks like the Bride of Chucky. Paul and I find her not only awake, she’s euphoric. It’s hard to tell if this mind state is being produced by some drug she is on or her relief at learning that she is still alive.

14.

To some Northwest Coastal tribes of British Columbia, the octopus plays an important role as a medicinal animal and is considered to possess formidable powers over sickness and health. Japanese, Alaskan, and Northwest native groups sometimes refer to the octopus as the Devil-fish. Devil-fish images can be found on totem crests of the Tlingit and Haida. In the Nootka legend “Raven Annoys Octopus,” the wily Raven gets his due when he insists on bothering Octopus while she is gathering clams. It’s a rare animal that can one-up Raven.

“The octopus can detach a limb at will to serve as a distraction against would-be predators.”

15.

From *Avia, Queen of the Symbolic Meanings* blog: “Octopi are invertebrates, meaning they do not have a structured spinal column. This is symbolic of agility, grace and flexibility. She is able to slip out of the tightest places, and ambulate as if she is the embodiment of water itself. Take the time to observe the way the octopus moves—it is hypnotic. As a totem, the octopus reminds us to loosen up—relax. The octopus can detach a limb at will to serve as a distraction against would-be predators. From a totem perspective we could translate this to mean that we ourselves have the ability to cut loose excess baggage in our lives in order to achieve our desire.”

16.

More than a month after surgery, mobility has not returned to Maxine’s left side and the strength on her right side is a fraction of what it was pre-surgery. Unlike the octopus, she can no longer ambulate, let alone gracefully. My mother-in-law is not reconciled to the “excess baggage” she has cut loose. She is disconsolate about what has happened and blames Dr. Lee.

17.

Two months later Maxine is transported by ambulance, and at a cost of two thousand dollars, from the nursing home to Group Health Cooperative for

an appointment. Her condition is to be assessed by her neurologist and the surgeon. Both are baffled by her lack of progress. They raise her arm above her head and when it falls to her chest in lieu of hitting her in the face, they conclude that she’s not paralyzed. There is no clear reason why, they say, that months after surgery she can do little more than lie in bed or in a reclining wheelchair in the nursing home she is now consigned to. Dr. Lee recommends psychotherapy. “Maybe it will help her loosen up,” he says.

18.

At the Omega Ouzeri, Andy can’t resist asking the waitress if the grilled octopus is good. “Best thing on the menu,” she answers without hesitation. So we order it. The avid gourmand in my brother-in-law wins out over my silly objections about eating an invertebrate that often demonstrates more intelligence than we humans. Maxine declines to try it, but I decide to have a taste. Mixed with a lightly-dressed salad of fresh field greens and fingerling potatoes, the octopus has a tender texture and faintly smoky taste. I chew it slowly, deliberately, savoring each bite and silently vow never to eat it again. ✧

Judith Gille’s articles and essays have appeared in the New York Times, the L.A. Times, the Dallas Morning News, the Florida Sun-Sentinel, and in numerous literary anthologies, magazines, and online journals. Writer’s Digest awarded her memoir, The View from Casa Chepitos: A Journey Beyond the Border, its Grand Prize in 2013. The book also received a Nautilus Award and an honorable mention for memoir from the Eric Hofer awards. Currently Judith is working on a collection of travel essays to be published in 2018. She divides her time between San Miguel de Allende, Mexico and Seattle, WA.

Regimen

Dinner: three piles of puréed plated slush.
Napkin-wipe the peas that almost
reach the toothless mouth. *Good girl.*

Daughter Ruth braids hair, files and clips
nails. Two plastic bracelets cuff one wrist.
Risk of falling, warns the yellow band.

(In
dreams Ruth washes purple from her hands.)

Ninety-nine. Straw-sip grape juice. Dribbl
robe, gown. Purple spots dot sheets. e

Diaper time sunset urine reek
Night nurse TV *Purple shadows: rise.*
Righteous purple: Draw Near. Remind them—

my purple other bracelet
D. N. R.

By Vernita Hall

Vernita Hall won the Marsh Hawk Press Robert Creeley Prize for *Where William Walked*. The Hitchhiking Robot Learns About Philadelphians won the Moonstone Chapbook Contest (judge Afaa Michael Weaver). She placed second in American Literary Review's Creative Nonfiction Contest and was second runner-up for the Los Angeles Review Nonfiction Award. Her poetry and essays appear in numerous journals, including Atlanta Review, Philadelphia Stories, Referential, Mezzo Cammin, Canary, African American Review, and anthologies *Forgotten Women* (Grayson Books) and *Not Our President* (Third World Press). As an MFA in creative writing from Rosemont College, she serves on the poetry review board of Philadelphia Stories.

A Doctor's Life

hands up: child, you got me
with your freeze-startled stare
cross-legged on your floor
your boobtube glare

I come in peace from shiftworkland
a 24-hour war
tomorrow night's shift
very likely hours more

a scream-knot holds your little throat
all set to give mom a danger-note
for the slackjaw stubbleman stood in the door

I've ripped your eyes from looney tunes
from afterschool television balloons
my right hand on bureaucracy
I swear you're better off with the dad on tv

you see someone tall
from younger photos on the wall
he's changed somehow
in this empty-guilty older now

you fright just like your mother
may we not all hate each other
my job shifts here, to never think

of that that sweats and spreads and stinks
of that that asks and cries and yells
barks and sues and bleeds and swells
shudders and splits and oozes
cakes and crusts and boozes
gasps and yelps and fights and scars

I do this for you.
whoever you are.

By Jen Burke Anderson

Jen Burke Anderson is a writer in San Francisco. She is working on a novel, will be reading at San Francisco's Litquake Festival this October, and is studying German at the Goethe-Institut. This is her first published poem.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO



Photo by Michael P. Stevens, MD

View from the Internal Medicine clinic, in Lomitas, Honduras. See photo essay, pages 15–18 for more.