LIFELINES

Volume 8
For Pano Rodis
Artist, teacher, healer
1959—2014
From the Editors:

We are born storytellers. In person, on the phone, in print, and online, we narrate our world to each other and to ourselves. We tell one another stories to say what has happened, what could happen, what could have happened. And we need these stories—truthful and fictional—to make sense of ourselves and our experiences. Through storytelling, we examine our lives and make them worth living, especially in the face of misfortune, impairment, and grave illness. Through storytelling, we also remind each other of brightness, humor, and hope where it may not be so obvious.

Some of the most important stories we tell are about our health. Patients share how they have been feeling. Doctors discuss what happens next. Families share how their loved one is doing. Newspapers report on the latest research. Because medicine’s therapies are ever more technical and mystifying, the need for healing is as simple and central as ever. In telling the stories of our sickness and well-being, we escape the anonymity of hospital gowns and dense medical records and make sense of the moments that try us most.

In this edition of Lifelines, our generous contributors reflect on their experiences with healthcare to share their struggles and triumphs, their fears and frustrations, their resilience and wit. Through art, poems, and prose, they take us to hospital.
wards, bedrooms, beaches, and beyond. The stories are unique and personal in their details, but familiar and touching in their heartfelt humanity. Read and hear. Look and see. Share and understand.

Enjoy,
Liam

William Anthony Guerin
Editor-in-Chief
Geisel School of Medicine ‘17
About the Artwork:

In this volume, we present the works of two New Hampshire artists. The cover art and the pieces containing letters interspersed between the written pieces, with the exception of the last drawing, are by Kait Armstrong. The series of 26 linocuts represent her family’s experience with Alport Syndrome. The final piece of this Lifelines collection is accompanied by an illustration inspired by the whimsical “Dr. Sharkattack” story, made specially for this publication, by Katy Ficarra. Please see their statements about their works below:

“A is for Alport Syndrome”

Alport Syndrome is an inherited disease of the kidney that can also affect the inner ear and eyes. My son, Patch, has Alport Syndrome, and my two daughters are affected to lesser degrees. Patch’s diagnosis at age two forced me to do extensive research. I utilized art as a vehicle to retain the overload of new information and process the complicated emotions tied in with my being a carrier of this disease.

The “A is for Alport Syndrome” series began as an attempt to add levity to the seriousness of a chronic illness. We associate an alphabet story with the innocence of youth, but it is nonetheless useful as an organizational and educational tool. Historical-
Lifelines

ly, I have been most drawn to fabric; formally educated in textile design, I often incorporate fiber, color, and pattern into my artwork. The bold graphic quality of a black and white linocut, however, was perfect for the imagery I wanted to portray. The linocut process afforded me an ease of making multiple reproductions, ideal for creating a broader, public awareness. Working with this series of 26 small prints also offered me a focus and a sense of control over a part of my life filled with uncertainty.

In hindsight, I see this venture as a celebration of what challenge and adversity can bring to one's life. Inspiration and growth often come from difficult places. What began as an exploration of a disease and catharsis for negative emotion evolved into the exploration of a new media and an unexpected nurturing of my interests and goals in life.

Kait Armstrong

“Dr. Sharkattack” Page 91

Katy Ficarra is an illustrator, sketchbook keeper, and comics artist. When not working on art projects she can be difficult to find, as she has a severe case of wanderlust. Art from her travels is posted on her blog “Sketchbook Wanderings.”
A IS FOR ALPORT SYNDROME
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True Medicine
For Pano Rodis

Sienna Craig, PhD

I am grieving for you
I am grieving for you

On these days when our
Summer valleys turn toward
The wane of winter,
When we see the world
As if through a sunflower lens
Or as if witnessing
Sky and forest meet:
Yellow and blue spilling through
To green

I am mourning you
I am mourning you

To breathe in this tumult
Of equinox wind
To watch a tousled atmosphere
Is to remember the sweep
Of your conviction,
The fluid nature of your mind
Clarity born not from placidity
But from clear skies, still
Like a barred owl
Painting his call against
A North Country night

I am holding you
I am holding you

With one palm open
Eyes closed to feel the loss
Knowing that hundreds –
Thousands, even – now do the same
As you travel the long path of light
Were we unable to bear you up,
You would still have gone
But there is comfort in knowing
We are a constellation you’ve made,
And to which you belong

I am releasing you
I am releasing you

Into this cool autumn, before
Your time, but your time still
The landscape of your voice
Now a distant planet I call home
The true healing comes
When poison tucks itself away
LIFELINES

And tenderness flows:
Vein-full and pulsing
Not unlike this river
By which we mark time

I am carrying you
I am carrying you

The true medicine is presence
Taking a deep sip
Of someone else’s suffering
And letting it change you
As it runs its course
Let us be your ocean
Let us open up our skies
Let us release the dams
Let us bathe you in love
Several years ago I told this story to a dear friend and teacher, Pano Rodis. He was interviewing me for work, and I was trying to share something which might give him an idea of the joyful side of hospice care. I have permission to allow this story to continue to bear fruit and remind us that we all are, whether or not we know it at the time, just walking each other home.

This is Ginny’s story. She was living on a mountain with her husband Vail, here in the Upper Valley. The road to their little farm house was a path beside a wooded meadow and was resplendent in creatures moving through colorful foliage any time of the day or night or season in perfect freedom.

Ginny was fierce in protecting their sanctuary and, in October or November, had often chased away a hunter who thought to make a meal of one of the wild turkeys, bucks, or bears. We who worked there saw many flocks of animals comfortably eating the apples from the orchard or raiding the berry patches. Ginny watched them from her windows and from her back porch. She was truly content in this setting year after year. The animal photos decorated the walls and her piano gave melody though she was losing her eyesight. She strained to see the tableau and she marveled at each participant. She lingered to watch, though she had been unusually tired over the past few weeks.

Ginny was a peppery 92. I want you to imagine her blue checked table cloth and her well-appointed kitchen, as well as her family recipes from Nova Scotia. It was a pleasant way to spend my afternoons, to be
cooking with and for her as her energy waned.

We learned in September that Ginny had stage four Leukemia. She stayed in bed most of the time. She also was becoming quite blind from Macular Degeneration. She told me there were many things she had wanted to do and had not experienced. She mentioned not having children as a regret—she had never held a newborn.

That week a mutual friend became a grandmother. Hazen, at five days old, was brought to visit Ginny by his family, and she cradled him in her arms, propped up on pillows. She was as we all were, in awe of this miracle of life. His parents said to her, “Today he is your visiting angel, but when you go to be with God, would you watch out for him? He will need a guardian angel.” She took a lengthy pause. She seemed to ponder this request very seriously, then responded that she would look for him, and thanked them. Ginny spoke about this with me, far into the evening. She was a woman of faith. Later, next spring, she planned to bring Hazen to her pond and baptize him on what would have been her 93rd birthday.

So the day came that Ginny would die. At twilight, a young deer came to the house. Ginny lay in a hospital bed beside the window where she might see the setting sun, through the leaves trimming her windowsill. The deer lay in the flowerbed next to the window. He was no more than the width of the wall away. There he remained through the night. We began to sense that he was, perhaps, keeping a vigil, as were we.

At 3:15 AM Ginny just stopped breathing. We performed the last of the tasks for her with the nurse who had come to pronounce her time of death. We cried until we noticed the deer standing up outside the window. The early sun was shining a pale peach color and the grass was still frosted with crystals. Looking directly at us with his deep, dark eyes, he slowly ambled away through the apple orchard.
I have been convinced by native family lore that deer are Soul Bearers. I think this makes sense. It was a fitting tribute to this woman who sheltered all creatures and who was, no doubt, watching over her infant charge from the promised heaven.

If we are fortunate enough to live to a great age we become what my mother referred to as “Glorious Ruins.” Though frail and dying, there is yet in us ample and fruitful life. As far as we are allowed, we must walk each other home in peace and dignity, open to joy.
Exit

Corey Burchman, MD

I know you are sad about my leaving.
I am here now, and will be tomorrow.

Have no fear of what will become of my vision;
That fraudulent sense, that unsigned murmur.
For soon, I will see without sight.

Vision can be as bitter as winter.
It can lead you into a snowstorm in the wrong direction,
Coldness pressuring you to turn back.

Yet, without sight, vision becomes as innocent as love.

Have no fear of what will become of my hearing;
That beguiling function, that impalpable pulse.
For soon, the flash of sound drains away.

Sound can be as sour as spring green apples,
Guiding you into a well of thunder,
Deceiving the receiver.

Yet, without sound, hearing becomes as pure as the wool of a lamb.
LIFELINES

Have no fear of what will become of my touch;
That cream of sensuality, that corpus of caress.
For soon, I will feel without touch.

Touch can be as sharp as stinging nettles,
Stabbing the most solid of souls,
Wounding in hurtful ways.

Yet, without touch, feeling is transparent and clean.

How did we come to this place,
This precipice of disembodiment?
We wish it were different,
But the vital forms must return to the Athenaeum.

I know you are sad about my leaving.
I am here now, and will be tomorrow.
LIFELINES

Note After Hearing The Diagnosis

J. David Liss

Pilgrim, postman,
Imagination in quiet times
Goes to the doctor
Returns with these notes
From the abyss

To my daughter:

See the round moon
Like a silver note
Caught between the lines
Of the power cables?
I will be the words
Of that dark blue song

To my son:

As you send the ball
Arching through the air
To a hoop high above the ground—
That will be my arms
Extended to catch
Your gift to me
Now I may have to go.
Poised on the abyss,
Don’t know
If a hand is there
To catch
But soon
One at my back
Will push
LIFELINES
The Absent Place
Laura Foley

Her husband rests
in the slanting Adirondack chair,
centered on the lawn he’s just cut,
for the first time this summer—
the one they know is her last,
though she’s not yet sixty.
He savors the fragrant spice
of shorn grass and blooming lavender,
forgetting, for a moment,
her countless tumors,
the malignant blooming.
She heats water in a copper pot,
stirs in sugar, simmers a new batch
of hummingbird nectar,
as the tiny whirring birds arrive:
one, then two, then one again,
hovering in the absent place
where the feeder once hung.
Polished Nails

Rozanne Gold

So little today
just a woman on the verge

Eyes sunken
and cheekbones jutting

There were tumors on the side of her face
where the jaw line met the
ear and skin stretched
tight over bones and hollows.
A slight movement of the lips
a raising of the brow
and a last act of grace

Beds the color of blood
the promise of petals

You smell sweet to me
not at all like dust

A mother’s most loving gesture
to polish her grown daughter’s nails
LIFELINES
I’m listening to the chemo machine rhythmically go clunkada-clunk, clunkada-clunk, pumpint a liter of melphalan into danling tubes of the aphesis catheter sewn into my chest. The melphalan: the busy professional suits, neckties, stethoscopes, white coats; the seriously practical shoes; the lengthy explanatory tales and woes. Just another day hurtling down the rabbit hole of medical diagnosis and treatment. What’s up doc?

So I’m listening to the clunkada-clunk, saying “melphalan for Ungerman” silently to myself and aloud; I don’t know if I’m talking to myself or aloud, or just praying anymore. I think of Steve McQueen— one of my heroes, from the film The Sand Pebbles— where he says “What the hell happened?” Yes, Steve, what the hell happened?

He’s on a U.S Navy gunboat in the early 1900s in China. He’s beside Jack Nicholson, waking up hung over in a barracks in the The Last Detail. Steve’s heroic deeds, his calm and ultra-cool manner, his sea-bag-over-his-shoulder sailor life (I carried my seabag like that for years). His buddy in the movie, Richard Attenborough, I’m sure, had something to do with me joining the Navy, spending about two-thirds of the next nineteen years, first in the Navy, then on fishing boats off Alaska, around boats and the sea. I was Ungerman in those days: Never fear, Ungerman is here! Everything is Unger control.

In the film, Steve’s leading a shore party to rescue missionaries, including beautiful, sensual, yet innocent, Candace Bergman. Petty Officer Second Class Steve is left at a mission to cover the missionaries retreat. He’s fought for a few minutes, and he’s finally wounded, leaning against a low
wooden wall, and he says “What the hell happened?” Then he’s shot and slumps over.

Yes, Steve, “What the hell happened?” Exactly what I’m thinking as the melphalan pumps, clunkada-clunk, into my veins.

With a clunkada-clunk, Dick Cheney pops into my head. I had to have an aphesis catheter attached to my chest, right around the time Cheney accidently shot his buddy in the face with a shotgun. I was lying on one of those cushioned medical tables to get the spouts sewn on to drip in melphalan and the endless bags of this and that to come, and I’m looking up into the gauzy surgically-masked face of the technician poking around at my bare chest. I start babbling about Dick Cheney as the ceiling twirls, fluorescent tubes so much like spinning, bland, Star War’s swords, as he adjusted my position on the table.

Suddenly he shoves me hard as I’m snickering and chattering about Cheney shooting his buddy in the face with a shotgun, and, for the life of me (what an appropriate phrase here—yes, it was for the life of me; I mean, I’m in the world famous Mayo Clinic and Hospital. How can it not be for the life of me?) the whole room changed color. The light got whiter, brighter, hotter. The eyes behind the mask glared, lines hardening around the eyes, eyebrows turned down, like those stupid, angry frowny-faces, the anti-happy face. This guy was the anti-happy face, with thick eyebrows, like fuzzy brown caterpillars trying to reach each other over the wrinkled canyons and cracked landscape of his scowling brow.

With another clunkada-clunk, I think of the evangelical nephrologist in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where I lived at the time of diagnosis, whose face screams unblemished destiny, angelically bright, tinged with natural, heart-pumping pure oxygen, pink, rouged cheeks, upstaged by his huge white teeth, which for a very brief moment, reminded me of Mr. Ed, that
talking smart-aleck horse on TV in the sixties. The Doctor’s teeth are as white as a bleached Sunday shirt as he grins and talks multisyllabic medical words. He has that Pat Boone, God-blessed shine as he says, “You have Amyloidosis,” his face white with teeth again. I stare at his face, then down onto a sheet of paper between us. I try to spell the word on a piece of paper next to me on the counter; he notices I’m a lousy speller and writes the word down for me. I can’t get over how the “loid” seems to disappear when many folks say the word, including me. Where does that sound go?

At some point, we all fall down this rabbit hole of finding and seeking treatment for a catastrophic (what a word! CAT—AS—TRO—PHIC) medical event. Nothing is real anymore. A menagerie of characters and institutions start pulling life apart, like melting taffy on a hot day; endless phone calls and letter and forms and forms and more forms, tasks and more tasks to stay alive, to keep moving, to stay independent, tsk, tsk, tsk, stay on it or die, penniless, no less. All of life whirling to this melphalan moment, a moment we all come to, conscious or not, babbling or not, clunkada-clunk—clunkada clunk. Steve McQueen, Dick Cheney, God, Mr. Ed, a cacophony focused in a clunkada-clunk of a pump: “melphalan for Ungerman”, thoughts of Hollywood, thoughts of politics; thoughts of death, thoughts of God, or no thoughts at all.

Then, in another breath, out of the hole, heartbeats to the horizon until I stop running for a moment and realize:

The rabbit hole is always just right over there;  
the closer the earth under my feet  
slips towards the shadowed tones of the under known,  
the more I pray;  
the more I feel the clarity of the light;
LIFELINES

I’m on top of a sea of diamond dust;
I swirl and whirl;
the sun blessing down, all around and through my soul;
anger blinded forever,
into love.
GLOMERULUS

AP 'G IS FOR GLOMERULUS' K.W.A.
LIFELINES

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 the overhead air conditioning vents slipping past. My gurney was wheeled 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, and 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 while bleeding out from a huge stomach ulcer. There’d been no warning. If it weren’t for my wife’s quick actions, if I had 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.

“Ya know why they call him ‘slow hand’?” my surgeon asked, motioning to the TV. He was a short, stocky Asian 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 white, square 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.

“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. People stare down at me as the
band plays on. The place smells of sweat and reefer. In one corner, a slen-
der, full-lipped man wipes his jackknife on an immaculately white hand-
kercief and slips it into a vest pocket. A lit cigarette dangles precariously
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 asked. “Sounds like somethin’ my Grandpa would know.” From a needleless 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 LA. 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. “Yeah, 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 ’til my fingers felt thick and full with all of it.
LIFELINES

Hearing

AP 'H is for Hearing' KMA
LIFELINES

The Wait

Gata Hudson

Between
the blood draw
and the appointment:
the sitting
meditation
The Imagist
Rozanne Gold

Mosaic puffs of air
expand her
body and contract her
soul and define her worth,
contort her beauty
while exhuming faith

Baby-breath puffs trick me,
the presence who came
to will life into her form,
a circular wind pattern
of hope and wish

My mother is dying;
a slow ecstasy of ascent
happens as I climb upon the
bed and remove the diamond
from her elegant finger, already grey and
cold, it yields to this act of communion

With the ring comes a lock of auburn hair
that I cut and tie with a string
and put in a memory
We dress her in the outfit she wore
for her 80th birthday which she barely made it to
but with descending breaths
she made herself up to be
the movie star she always imagined

Pointy sunglasses awash in glittered bits,
the taupe-colored mink holding frail
shoulders, impeccable and seductive,
making an entrance that made us weep,
mind’s eye flooding with tears upon this ingénue

A glass of champagne, a nod to the room
She collapsed into a chair, panting then quiet
As sweet puffs of air shaped blueing coral lips, whispered
“Behold me”
LIFELINES
Almost Bedtime

Mary Wheeler

8:00 PM Pacific Time

Has she brushed her teeth today? She can’t remember.
She glares at the clock hanging on the wall above the poster reading “How’s your pain level?” Little cartoon faces from grins to grimaces rank it from 1 to 10. It’s seven o’clock, she is certain, then self-doubts. No, it’s 12:35. The big and little hands are so confusing.

The blaring light in the hallway never goes out. Her roommate (what’s her name?) on the other side of the curtain snores in an annoying manner. Beeps and buzzes and code blues interrupt any hope of a restful night ahead. The night shift has just come on; they’ve introduced themselves, but the mother has already forgotten their names. Her blood pressure has been taken yet again, and bland applesauce disguising crushed pills slides down her throat. The mother has forgotten what her favorite nightgown looks like and though part of her cares about that, most of her just doesn’t care about anything anymore. What time it is, what day it is, what she wears—what’s the point? The wretched hospital gown scratches her neck and with no fresh air coming through the window, her thoughts feel suffocated. The mother scrutinizes the congested highway of blue veins protruding from her hands that used to dance on grand piano keys playing elaborate chords and zippy tunes. Now these fingers can barely hold silverware, much less find her mouth. She’s turned into a baby bird being spoon fed bland oatmeal which is never hot enough. Bland, lukewarm oatmeal—that’s what she has to look forward to when tomorrow dawns. Practicing
her tongue swipe around the perimeter of her upper and lower gums
discovering ancient particles of food, the mother drifts off to a temporary
restless slumber, weeping silently to herself. How much longer, Lord? she
thinks. And what is this pesky white bracelet around my wrist?

10:00 PM Central Time

Soaking in her oversized tub, the daughter attempts to wash away
the day’s worries with Dove soap, her mother’s favorite. Its scent triggers
pleasant childhood memories when death was the furthest thing from bed-
time thoughts. Dove, the perfect name for a peaceful soap, she thinks. The
daughter rubs it on her arms and face and submerges, leaving the warm
washcloth on her chest in an attempt to relax, think pleasant thoughts,
hum soothing tunes, and plan tonight’s dreams. Her eyes begin to close
when, suddenly, they sense a swift offensive kick from the devil aimed at
her heart. Visions of her mother, a thousand miles away, come into a rude,
all-too-familiar focus. With glassy, lifeless eyes, her mother stares ahead,
slumped and drooling in her wheelchair in a sterile room. Like a skilled
goalie, the daughter reacts to the onslaught, quickly punting the image
out of her head before it lodges in her heart. Clutching the Dove-scented
washcloth she prays aloud, “Dear God, tonight, please tonight, call my
mother home. Please take her in her sleep. May she let go and be swept up
by angels. She is ready, Lord. Please, no more of this misery for her.”
Teeth brushed, face washed, flannel nightgown on, the daughter looks at
her reflection in the bathroom mirror, her own face looking older every
day. She snuggles up next to her husband, clutching her bedtime read, a
mindless plot which successfully lulls her eyes closed. But oh! Suddenly
such a real, wretched dream!
DNR, DNR, DNR flashes in neon Las Vegas lights, awakening her with a start. That awful white bracelet on her mother’s wrist. A heinous image. Does her mother even know what it stands for? Is this a premonition? Oh Lord, let this be the night.
I am the pastor of a small New England church—twenty folks on a Sunday is a good crowd! Of course, ministering to the larger community goes without saying here in Vermont. Our annual Community Candlelight Service takes place the Sunday evening before Christmas. Folks from the surrounding area, not only our congregation, come together to hear about the Holy birth, sing carols, and fellowship downstairs following the service. Numerous hands are needed to make this evening a special time for everyone who attends.

How long I had been sick I cannot say, but probably longer than I realized. By December 2012, the fatigue and discomfort were wearing me down. Extra planning and services are always part of Advent. The Service of Remembrance on the first Sunday afternoon of December is particularly important for our aging congregation, because it provides a time to acknowledge the sadness and the loss of loved ones during this supposedly “merry” season. I managed to get through it.

I will admit that preparation and preaching were becoming quite a struggle, but I kept going. Not only was my health causing anxiety, but discord in the church was a huge source of stress for me at that point. Who would agree to read the Advent Candlelight passages? Would anyone bake cookies? Were the internal struggles negating the Christmas message?

We don’t have many children who come to church regularly, but sometimes they come for this special service, so I always try to have a story geared to them, and the rest of the folks who join us seem to enjoy it, too. I told myself I would do my best to bring the joy and hope of Christmas
to them, even though my heart held very little of either. At that point, the wonder of this holy season eluded me.

My cancer diagnosis had come the week before and I shared it with my congregation. There was a noticeable sense of concern and unease at the morning worship service. Infighting seemed to have disappeared, for which I was grateful. It was apparent that folks didn’t know what to say, so, after church, preparation for the evening provided a way to keep busy. As I headed to church that evening, my prayer was to let the Light of Christ shine into the hearts of those who attended. I knew family and friends would be there as usual, as well as some folks from the community. Upon arriving, I immediately took my fruit platter downstairs to the Community Room.

When I went back upstairs, I was stunned to see the sanctuary so packed. It seemed like the entire community was there. When the service began and I extended the welcome. I joked “It would be great to have the church this full on a Sunday morning!” They laughed and it kept me from crying. Strangely I didn’t feel pitied, but loved.

It seems that my congregation had called around to share the news of my health crisis and to invite folks to come to church to support me. Even though they weren’t all there to listen to the Christmas story that night, they did hear it and the Christ child was slowly reborn in my heart again.
In the Honda Service Area

Laura Foley

We’re sitting knee-to-knee
while her car gets new brakes, mine new fluids,
she discusses hip replacement,
in warrior-like detail, with a friend,
each slice to flesh, how skin is spread
from bone, the pain she’s in, her plans when she gets home,
the miracle of titanium. I’m trying not to hear,
two foam plugs squeezed snugly in my ears,
head bent low over the Iliad. I’m at the part
where Achilles, known for ripping limbs,
breaking hips apart, rests angry in his tent,
saying he will not fight, not for shining pots of gold,
nor the seven dancing girls Agamemnon offers.
But, time and again, her new hips, titanium and strong as a god’s,
break through the Bronze Age scene, her voice
a wave dissolving the Trojan beach.
I love legs in the morning.  
The length of them  
awaking to all  
they can be;  
running, dancing, dodging  
rain, or bullets, even IEDs.

My legs have taken me  
to where I’ve been.  
Why not where I will be?  
Pursuing a woman, loving her,  
and playing horsey  
with our baby on my knee.

I tell the nurses, doctors, aides  
I tell them everything.  
That even with an IV drip  
The pain’s the same.  
My toes still itch.  
“It’s normal,” they all say,  
as if passing on the time of day.

The sun was up and so were we.  
That is my legs and me.
But as I rolled out of bed
and my head hit the floor
I remembered— then—
I don’t have legs anymore.
“There isn’t much time left,” Jorn told me. I wondered if I had forgotten the hour of an appointment, the arrival of a dinner guest. He dropped into the over-stuffed chair and put his head in his hands. He was so fragile at that moment, his hands thin and white.

What had I missed, what corner had he turned, to lead to his shaking distress? A slip, some hour of change had passed, and I didn’t know where or when it had happened. “Tell me what you’re thinking. What is it?”

“No time for what? Tell me.”

“I’ll forget soon. Everything. I won’t remember names and dates, I’ll forget places, and the hours we’ve spent together. Soon, it’s possible I won’t remember who you are, what I have accomplished. My slate will be wiped clean.” He made a steeple with his hands and gazed beyond the rooftops. It was, though the air had blued with the chill of his words, as if a fire burned in the little room.

“Why do you say such a thing? You’re many years off from such worries. You’re the most brilliant, quickest mind I’ve ever known.”

He didn’t reply, only waved me quiet, and when I reached out to stroke his cheek, he waved me out of the room. I left him there reluctantly, his hands trembling at his temples.

I returned to the library, shaken by his words of fear, his paleness.
Lifelines

Jorn had always been both strong and logical. I ran my hands over the volumes of his mind: academic papers, fiction tomes, works of poetry. He was a learned man afraid of losing his edge, and that was all, I decided. As the hour passed, I realized, the word that should have come to mind was relevancy. Jorn was afraid of no longer being relevant. Most things are eventually filed away under irrelevancy: old ideas, ways of life, people. I sat at the desk, my eyes watching the changing shadows of the quiet room.

2010 November
Berlin

I first met Jorn in 1991 when I left Berlin for the Universiteit van Amsterdam to further my studies. At the time, he was finishing out the last year of his tenure as a Humanities Professor. I attended none of his classes, but often saw him on afternoon breaks with his portable writer and papers; no lunch, always work. He was the tallest man I had ever seen, and thin. His eyeglasses were wont to slip often, and he was always in the habit of pushing them back, and how I met him was by giving the coy but honest advice that he should be fixed for a new pair more suitable.

Other than his constant relationship with his eyeglasses, he had a habit of running his hand through a dark-blond mop of hair, half tied back, half forever falling in front of his large brown eyes. It was both the eyeglasses and thick mop of hair that made me decide. Fortunately, he must also have found some endearments in me as we became an instant couple. We wasted no time in locating a suitable apartment. We had never spoken of long-term, only of compatibility for companionship; after five years together we had still never spoken of it. We shared similar ideas in politics and social issues, the same tastes in literature and history. And where there
is compatibility, he often said, there is a peace in life.

I was amazed to discover the magnitude of his literary work. I had only begun to gather my own writing into a real sense of order and he was quite enthused to assist in the matter, ordering me to discard this work for nonsense or edit another for its lack of precision. He would pour over my writing, never leaving a grunt of dissatisfaction un-grunted, a head-shake of brilliance acknowledged un-shook. I came to rely not only on his academic and literary superiority, but his easy presence and reliable gentleness about life.

Jorn was a child of the Hongerwinter of 1944. He was four years old when his father and mother were executed on the street for hiding two Jews: a young woman and her child. He had watched his mother beg for her life; what would happen to her boy? They left him there with the bodies of his parents.

Not only had the Jewish population gone into hiding if they could, but many young Dutch men, too, for fear they would be taken, their families left without male survivors. The Nazis stole boys and men from their homes, even took them as they pedaled along on their bicycles. The people of Holland feared that if they were taken from Dutch soil into Germany they would never return. All of Jorn’s male relatives had already gone, taken by trains in the night. He had no living female relatives.

He survived by eating tulip bulbs and whatever potato peelings he could find. Now and again, someone would take pity, give him potato broth, shelter for a night or two. Despite the pity neighbors or strangers felt, there was enough for no one. He slept where he could, scrounged whatever material he might find to keep himself warm. All of Holland was sick, starving, and freezing. Most days and nights were survived without electricity or running water.
After the Allied liberation, the health of the people of Holland took years to recover. Some years after the famine had ended, Jorn was diagnosed with Celiac Disease. As a young man of twenty-two, he was diagnosed with clinical depression. Many children who survived the Hongerwinter had various cognitive or physical ailments that would plague them their whole lives.

I knew, as he related these recollections of his suffering and survival, that the darkest things were locked inside and would never be told.

1996 April
Den Haag, Nederland

“Madame—excusez-moi—Mademoiselle, I’m very sorry.”

I was unable to reply to Dr. Bernard. A million thoughts raced incoherently. Early-onset Alzheimer’s. It seemed impossible. It had all come upon us so quickly. Jorn’s mind was brilliant; what of his work, his writing? Dementia was a symptom, Alzheimer’s the cause. I couldn’t comprehend most of his words. There had been many clues in the last two years, but the disease was something I knew nothing about: symptoms, behaviors, what to do.

“Are there relatives? You are his only family?”

“Yes. There’s only myself. He has no relatives that I’m aware of. We’ve been together five years. He’s mentioned no one.” I was numb and torn. The doctor handed me pamphlets, fact-sheets, referral notes for prescriptions. I could only accept the diagnosis and the fuzzy sound of Dr. Bernard’s voice with dumb resignation.

We set off on the sixty-five kilometers towards home; Jorn calmly settled in the passenger seat, humming an old ’70’s rock tune. The longer
we drove in silence, the angrier I became. “No!” I forced our rental car off at an exit somewhere in Leiden.

“We’ll go to Munich, Vienna.” The passing traffic nudged the compact steadily as we sat with the motor off. “Do you hear me?”

“Listen, you better get going, you know it’s illegal to stop here.”

“Damn this! How could this happen to you!” The world was having its way with him and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I wept bitterly, flung over the wheel. The world could go on without both of us as far as I was concerned. I wanted to throw the car into traffic, beg for his life. There was no one to whom I could beg.

“Here. Here, stop it now.”

He grabbed hold of me, and I knew I would never be ready for him to let go.

2011 January
Berlin

Jorn had refused to see doctors in Munich and Vienna. He was racing against time and he would lose, he had said once; no need to waste precious moments fighting a lost battle.

“Fight, damn you!” I often reprimanded him.

“I’ll fight to the end. Wherever that is,” he reassured. I had missed so many clues, but by the time the disease was upon us, it had been unfolding for years.

I cared for him with no less devotion, loved him no less than I had ever loved him; I loved him more. He was a fleeting beauty, a brief and glorious event. He would never happen to the world again, and he struggled to find what he might leave of himself behind.
We visited Dr. Bernard many times over the months; a prescription change, new medication trial. Jorn was suffering what the doctors termed Rapid Cognitive Decline. I only knew time was squeezing the breath out of him and didn’t care for fancy names for the vile thief. There were studies, references, explanations for this mood or that behavior, but I struggled to understand.

We were also referred to the Dutch Famine Birth Cohort Study in Amsterdam, a decades long research study concerning the lifelong effects of famine on fetal development: instances of diabetes, abnormal cognitive development, and a host of other maladies. We learned that babies born to famined mothers, as well as some who suffered starvation as small children, suffered a high risk of schizophrenia in adult life, even when they had recovered from their malnutrition.

I was certain none of the findings applied to Jorn as he had been healthy before the famine, already four years of age during 1944-1945. Nevertheless, I combed the study for some connection. There was nothing definitive culled that concluded Jorn’s early-onset was directly related to his malnutrition as a small child, but there was much that had followed him out of the famine.

The more I believed I comprehended, the less I did, and in the end it wouldn’t matter. What mattered was that I would tend to him carefully, with a love and tenderness his mother would have wished for him. And that I would wait with him, for the darkness which no lamp could illuminate.
“What does this mean?” Jorn raged across the desk. Crumpling the paper, he threw it at me and leapt two strides, ripping the book from my hands.

“What is it?”

He tore at his hair, raged at no one—or perhaps, the demon holding him in its death grip. I sat unmoving, afraid to approach him and comfort.

A few moments later he retrieved the book and caressed it gently.

“My books, my writing. The words are leaving me, Aida.”

So dark was the shadow that crossed over his face. I dropped to my knees and cradled him like a child. He wept until falling asleep and I held him until the moon-haze rose above the city lights. I wanted to snatch him back from the gate of hell. I could do nothing more than find small and constant ways to reassure him that I would arise with him each day, settle with him into each dark night.

When he awoke, I prepared the late evening meal while he wrote feverishly. He closed his files and came to the table when I lit the candles, the previous hours pushed away.

“You weren’t my first love, as you know.”

“Indeed not.” I winked at him, anticipating his next thought.

“But you’ve been the best love. My last love.” He ate and drank, pausing to smile at me now and again. He ran his palm over his forehead, his long fingers through his thick hair.

I smiled back when its weight fell again over his eyes. Such small moments renewed us as was needed and required so that we kept on, clinging to the clarity, shoring up strength for the next battle.
2011 February
Berlin

There had never been a moment I thought to run away from it all, give Jorn over to the care of others more knowledgeable about such things. I had always been a person who relied heavily on instinct; my impressions of situations, people, had never failed me in life. My instincts would come to fail me miserably.

I was so tired. Winter had come early that year; how frightened we both were. Whenever Jorn turned, he would find me there. I could turn to no one and my own health flagged. My senses, hyper with the constant struggle, were at once dulled by my weariness. How fragile our minds are, despite our ability to learn, reason, recover—intricate machines laid waste by a thin, faulty wire or recurring dent.

1996 September
Jordaan, Amsterdam

Violence was neither in my nor Jorn’s natures, so when I slapped him hard across his right cheek, we sat, both stunned, for a time.

“Did I really deserve that?”

“How could you ever ask me such a thing? I won’t listen to any more of this.”

“Aida, if you love me, you’ll listen.”

“Shut up. Shut up!” I placed my hands over my ears, my head in my lap. I tried distracting myself from his voice, my own thoughts.

“I know you hear me. Tell me you never loved me. You owe me the truth.”

I brought my face up to his, enraged, hurt. I turned my head away
and folded my hands in my lap, waiting for the flames in my cheeks to ebb.

“How can you ask me that?”

“For a moment, indulge me. If you care.”

I had indulged him the world. Loved him, cared for him, fought for him. I needed a drink, a pill, a soft place I could bury my head and weep myself dry.

“When you love someone, you don’t want them to suffer,” he said.

“Do you think I want you to suffer?”

“No. You’ve been my lover and my friend. My mother. This is why you’re the only one I can ask.”

“I am the one you can’t ask! Don’t you get it?”

“You love me.”

“Because I love you, I could never.”

“Did you ever wonder about autumn leaves? They are just shells of themselves, really, eager to follow whichever dance the wind commands. It is not questioned. It is natural.”

“You are hardly a leaf on an autumn tree.”

“Am I not?”

“You’re a human being.”

“I’m the ghost of a human being. A husk. I no longer taste life, feel it. You’re the only thing that has kept me here so long.”

“There are still beautiful moments.”

“How much longer? I’m asking you to help me, Aida. Help me.”

The siren of an ambulance rushing toward someone or away with someone startled me, and I went to the window to scan the street below. My bones ached. I felt I would never put two intelligent thoughts together again. There was no question that what he was asking was unthinkable to me.
The headache that had overpowered me the night before was an intermittent aching when I awoke. Jorn was missing from bed, and I lay for a few moments, listening to the sounds of the house and the chatter of children on the street. I pulled myself carefully bedside, remained still to measure how my body would handle itself. The aching went away when I stood.

I went in search of him, first to the living room, kitchen, his study, and finally the bathroom. I didn’t know in what state he was in, but I didn’t want to panic. It was only October, but most days had already become bitterly cold. I stepped into the hall and noticed Jorn’s coat, scarf, and his winter boots were gone. It was a good day.

I stepped into a hot shower and lingered, allowing the heat to loosen both tension and thought. When I finished, I called out in hopes Jorn had returned, but I was still alone. I dressed and went to put the kettle on for tea. Yes, it was a good day. Today he was remembering. He knew one of the first things I would do is put a kettle to boil. He had pushed a note through the kettle handle. “Sweetheart, there is a key. See it there on my desk? It is the safe key. Open the safe. I love you.”

I knew only that the papers he had been working on for the last year were kept in the safe. I never questioned him regarding this private matter, but my curiosity was piqued so I took the kettle from the burner and went to the study to find the key on his clean, tidy desk.

I removed two large envelopes and a large file of papers, bound in heavy leather cording. Otherwise, the safe was empty, and I took the bundle to the desk to sit. The top envelope was thick, addressed to me.
The second envelope, page thin, was addressed to Willem. The file he had addressed: Dr. Levy: Universiteit van Amsterdam.

I opened the envelope for me. There were pages of a letter, stacks of guilder notes, bank wrapped. Confused, I opened the pages. It began: Beautiful Aida, where can I begin? I began to count the stacks. There were one million guilder notes. I read more of the letter. You will need this money.

I didn’t care that I was breaking a trust in privacy, I opened the letter addressed to Willem. “My friend. Thank you is insufficient for the depth of your friendship. Please accept this. It is for the box, at the place I spoke to you about last week. Remember? My gratitude is eternal.” The loud knock at the door startled me. Jorn had forgotten his key, and the relief washed over me as I rushed to the door.

“Hello, Miss. I’m Inspecteur Visser, this is Inspecteur de Boer. May we come inside a moment to speak to you?”

It was suddenly so very cold. The buzzing in my ears, the long dark tunnel that appeared in my vision tested my balance, and I crashed backward into the hall. “No. Please? No.”

2011 May
New York

I was given Jorn’s last effects: a watch that no longer kept time, his wallet with identification, and a photograph of the two of us we had taken in Prague. His glasses. One small scratch on the left lens.

I resealed the letter addressed to Willem and mailed it, but I never spoke to him again. I didn’t want to acknowledge what I suspected. I neither wanted to accuse nor absolve him of any part he may or may not have
Lifelines

had in Jorn’s suicide.

Shipping ahead all the volumes of Jorn’s work, I delivered the files in my charge to Dr. Levy, and settled matters with our apartment. I spent last moments with friends, then returned to Berlin by train.

I carried a deep guilt. Perhaps, I did not love him enough? He was suffering, yet I refused to listen to his cry of humanity when it mattered most. I had failed him. It haunted me. It haunts me still, in quiet hours when alone with my thoughts, echoes of his disease drawing the darkness down. It took me two years to remember the goodness we shared, our time of joy and laughter. But I did come to remember.

Perhaps, people come to us whole and leave in pieces. Perhaps, it is the other way around. I have come to learn that each one of us leaves something behind; as brief as we are, there is no life which does not leave its mark upon the soul of another. We are such fascinating creatures. We weep yet rejoice, suffer yet renew. We stumble, but we battle on.

I don’t know if I could have made the same decision Jorn made or if I might ever have to ponder the question at some future point in time. I believe he discovered the full essence of what it means to be human. And from the ultimate question of life and death, he did not make his decision lightly— not lightly, but with the deepest consideration as a human being.

I have never judged his choice, though I have suffered the loss of him terribly. I follow the research studies closely now. Cheering each new piece of information, every minute finding that might bring us closer to an arrest or a cure. We are infinitely unique: the brilliance of our minds, the will of our spirits. That relentless fortitude to carry on despite. To carry on, despite.
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Gestation

Meredith MacMartin, MD

I am six weeks pregnant.
I am watching the window, the pine trees exhaling their clouds of snow into the bright blue.
I am dumb in the face of your death.

You cough silently into your tube, an alarm sounds.
Across your bed, your huddled family flinches, sighs.
Your hands are calloused and warm.

I am thinking of that embryo, swimming in salt.
I am watching your mother, watching you die.
Our cheeks wet, hearts aching for what lies ahead.
LIFELINES

The Caul

J. David Liss

Your face wears the yellow
light of the sun falling on it
like a veil.
When you talk about your sorrow
I hear the bride that is left in you
repeating her vows again and again.

All the openings in your face
are running with yellow light,
the cancer dripping from your eyes, dribbling from your mouth.

When a cloud falls over the sun
Your face says, “This is the beginning of it.”
Like a woman looking down at herself
watching the birth
of the son she already knows is lost.
The important thing is not to stop questioning.

A.E.
With Blinding Sight

Elise Malecki, MD

She arrives in a gurney, wincing, squinting, though her focus is inward.
Pain out of proportion to exam: she read the textbook.
It doesn’t look good. Dead gut.
She does NOT want a breathing tube.
Not for more tests, not for the OR, not even for a short time.
She knows what this means.
I shepherd her family into the room for giving bad news.
They alternately weep and console each other.
Her brother is coming, so we keep hanging pressors.
Morphine doesn’t touch the pain.
The pulsing and beeping accelerate slowly but inexorably.
Her brother arrives; we let the last bag run out.
Her grimace fades.
The “bereavement basket” of Pepsis and candy bars holds little comfort.
Though it’s not written in her thick chart, the nurses tell me she had never wanted heroic measures.
I run to catch her family in the parking lot.
In the cool darkness, I ask them if we can examine her one more time.
“It’ll help us learn.”
I get a tear-stained signature.
Left behind
are her small wire-rimmed glasses.
She can’t see
what all the fuss is about.

*Title from Dylan Thomas.
Lifelines
Don’t pass out when you see Clara.  
Don’t pass out when you see the bag.  
Don’t judge your entire career in medicine based on your first reaction to Clara—
Your ability to cut her, to turn her over, to touch her.  
Rationalize as much as you can.  
She wanted to do this.  
She wanted to help you.  
Let her help you. 

Let yourself be nervous—
She probably imagined your first meeting anyway.  
She probably imagined that your heart would race,  
That your hand might shake,  
That your brain would fog,  
That you’d be afraid to hold the scalpel,  
That the smell might overwhelm,  
That the fear might break,  
That the confidence would take,  
And you would make  
Your first cut.  

And as you explore her offering,  
As you internalize her delicate make-up,
As she shapes and reshapes,
The dreams and visions you make,
As she teaches you universal truths,
And delights you with her secrets,
And strengthens the bonds of comradery,
And creates a space for teacher and student,
And nestles herself,
In that part of your memory that you guard forever,

You understand that she wanted to do this.
She wanted to help you.
You let her help you.
**Cadaver Lab**

*John Schneider, GSM ’17*

Most memorable in the cadaver lab—
Not the stainless steel walls
The bodies reclining on gleaming tables,
Hands, faces and genitals covered
The way children cover the privates of dolls
With ill-fitting and mismatched doll clothes.

Not brains kept in one-gallon plastic tubs
With lids and wire handles
The kind ice cream
Used to come in.

Not pachyderm-like skin hardened to brown
Wrinkles dried in folds
Organs floating in styrene vats
To mix and match for study.
Delicate flesh ruined by hundreds
Of scalpel incisions
Made by students
Intent on studying anatomy.

Not the excess fat scraped off
And put into steel containers
For disposal at day’s end
Not the incessant humming of ventilation fans
Carrying away fixative fumes
Along with nausea from empty stomachs.

Not the litanies of respect for the cadavers
And their families for their devotion to science.
Not the skin surfaces kept moist by spritzing
With bottles used by bikini-clad sun bathers.

What stuck with me:
The remains
Of multi-colored pacemaker wires
Copper ends frayed, pacemakers long gone

Lest someone get shocked by the dead
Breast inserts leaking silicon,
Steel hips and plastic knees.

The tattered flaps of tattooed skin
One stained bluish-green
Inscribed with a tribal-like circle of life.

These additions and decorations
Remain after our souls have gone.
LIFELINES

Procurement

Elise Malecki, MD

We board the van, coolers in hand
to perform our modern ritual,
no mention of the soul.

Hers was troubled.
She took pills intending never to wake up.
We meet her in the OR.

She has padding for her pressure points,
tape for her eyelids,
supplied out of habit, I guess.

The anesthesiologist keeps the vitals stable;
the cardiac surgeon secures the vessels and liberates the heart.
They both bid us good evening.

We continue with the harvest:
liver, kidneys, no pancreas today.
I silently thank her and close the wound.

Our patients are waiting.
Lifelines

Variations on a Theme

Michelle Chen

“If many remedies are prescribed for an illness, you may be certain that the illness has no cure.”

– A.P. Chekhov, The Cherry Orchard

1. Celexa

Insomniac, lay me down upon your bed so I may see the hibiscus in your palm that keeps you restless. I first saw your mesas carved in ink, a psychotropic mystique, my mother’s terror. A psychiatrist once birthed you, sent you into mind kicking and screaming and my own blood sent you back piece by piece from the pillow of the earth grieving disbelief launching each fossil beyond the pine trees, rising like snow in reverse. O dry bones of winter, eat up, eat up—anonymous & insoluble
2. *Ativan*

Like all things, spring is the annual king of what it sings. Today, like the red mouth of a baby, it sings to you. Benzodiazepine, you’re welcome to sprawl and snooze on my brown leather futon, faceless and featureless like the best of dreams. It’s appropriate—a less agreeable mother, a fat, fat block like the triplet gorges of Yangtze. Like the chances of poor Oliver getting more, you sand the desert with water. Chopping apples, brushing hair, bitter peels falling like parachutes. There’s energy in this dam if you’ll only plant the tomato seedlings deeper, write to dent the next page, cry when placebo becomes all too true.
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3. Prozac

There it goes
the famous name.
Succinct and two-lipped,
you fold your ivories delicately
and let them fall like birds into pools
of liquid grime, the ashtrays of the warm sea.
Serotonin, I lost you, but hysterically you were back
there all along, like a Russian doll. When I was young my mother
would grab my arm and point at the Christmas lights lining the roads
and snow as if directing a dog to a spot to defecate. Their summer ghosts
haunt me still along the odd black sidewalk hill. In the hot sun
she punctures, withers with mysterious ills, and paces
morningside to my hand to deposit the pill.
4. *Abilify*

My mind is not scrambled
eggs, though everyone besides
my mother believes that my thoughts have
become the consistency of abortion, the viscosity
of falling aspen and sassafras leaves. I say I want to go
to Italy, Alaska, Singapore, Mount Sinai Hospital. No one
agrees, but no one is me. My mother is open, pouring, spouting
as if she were the fountain of youth. I am not youthful.
Mildly sweet, the round green button goes down
with water, or not at all, unless I manage an ocean
of spit. Now my limbs tremble on a far higher
frequency than anyone can hear and my neck
fossilizes in every passing stillness. Any
shelter from autumnal storms drags me
to Lethe, to the heels of Janus. Call these
side effects, but I am content. A
psychiatrist once told me, “I think
that the psychiatrist and the poet are
natural enemies.” I concede
that I may be lightning
in a tornado or a pig
to a human, but
maybe content
is enough.
“You and I”
Cathy Pipas, MD

You come to me.

Embarrassed and obese,
Doubting your worth,
Judging your significance,
Lost to yourself.

You hide your pain,
I probe your experiences.

You focus on failings,
I observe your patterns.

You share your fear,
I listen to your story.

You divulge your abuse,
I reflect your words.

I am present for you,
Empathetic to familiar feelings,
Trained to help,
Human myself.
I validate your struggles,
You shed repressed tears.

I list your strengths.
You deny they exist.

I highlight your accomplishments,
You listen with skepticism.

I offer options,
You commit to try.

We share hope,
We value each other,
We link together,
Your successes connect with mine.

You come back.
The Emergency Room Visit

Danny Barebare

The door opens,
the howl of air,
in enters the
flu, colds, broken
bones, and a boy with a busted
head, my chair grows hard with
worry, she steps out relieved as
if to know what
it is, the sun waits outside,
a few clouds to clear, we drive
to CVS, the pharmacy, for
antibiotics for a kidney infection
and pneumonia. And hopefully
tomorrow the sun will rise
painlessly as the windowpane,
night healing,
the sunshine new,
fair weather ahead.
WORRY WAITING WHEN WHY

'W is for Worry'

AP

Kraft 2014
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Ward Wonders

Lindsay Boyers

The echo of heartbeats near the newfound graves,  
With the first breath of life and the last sigh of death  
Waving to each other in the night.  
Birthdays and funerals march along in unison, doors apart.  
Faces in scrubs rise and set with the sun,  
While those stuck in bed can only change their gowns, and wait.  
The rhythmic beeps of machines  
And the clack of shoes on the linoleum floor  
Sing a comforting melody.  
Armed with stethoscopes, and potions that drip into veins,  
They are puzzle-masters.  
Sometimes though, a piece may be missing,  
Or warped to no avail.  
It is magic to some,  
Pulling rabbits out of hats.  
But behind the puff of smoke,  
All that remains is a simple person with simple tools.  
Wards filled with mysteries and miracles big and small.
Focus

Jennifer Fleischer, GSM ’17

Sometimes you get so focused
On the target and your goal
On ambitions and intentions
And fulfilling a set “role”

Sometimes you get so focused
On the science and “the fix”
You start to focus on diseases
Numbers, CBCs, and lists

Sometimes you get so focused
Really “in the zone”
You are having a conversation
But it’s just with you alone

Sometimes you get so focused
You don’t see the forest from the trees
The human from the ailment
The patient from the disease

Sometimes you get so focused
On what you are trying to do
That you forget about the journey
And learning from that too
Sometimes you get so focused
You forget about the human race—
Just like there are all kinds of people to treat
We need all sorts of doctors in this place

Sometimes you get so focused
Trying to fit into a mold
You forget about what makes you unique
And let your specialness fold

Sometimes you get so focused
You forget that you are enough
That with compassion and understanding
You have all of the right stuff

Sometimes you need to remember
What it is you are trying to do
To focus on the journey
And bring your best you
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NOT ON
THE
CHROMOSOME

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HOSPITAL ANATOMY
A Sketch from a Patient’s Record
Michael Gessner

The hospital is a body too,
shiny corridors, like the many arms
of an ancient god with a centralized head,
busy always with the task of coordination.

The whole place breathes
with one breath: to keep
the organism going,
a host for every affliction of the human heart.

Such a record is made at night
among the silent colored lights
of monitors, the occasional cough or moan
among the soft rustlings of sheets,

or a stainless steel cart rolling between rooms,
while the whole enterprise, the building itself,
its cement and glass, the various staff,
breathe with mutual aspirations.
Children’s Hospital

Elise Malecki

Their dad was in a bad frame of mind; he set the house on fire while they slept. Over 90 percent burned, he lingered a few days.

We take them to the OR every other day to clean, debride, and graft the burns, apply the salves and dressings, then furl them snug in gauze and Ace.

7 yo F, 10 percent burned: arms and legs. Dad carried her out first. She acts like she’s four, wants nothing to do with us. At times she can laugh and play.

10 yo M, 17 percent burned: legs and feet. He cries constantly. He misses his dad. Mom doesn’t want to hear it.

13 yo M, 70 percent burned: hands, arms, feet, legs, back, head. Mercifully his front is mostly spared. Dad must have slung him over his shoulder. It’ll be weeks before we wake him.

1.75 liters of vodka might get me through the week.
Dr. Sharkattack

Scott Rooker

Dr. Sharkattack was a shark, born to human parents, Roger and Cynthia Sharkattack, on May 2, 1942, in Sussex, England. Nobody ever mentioned the fact that he was a shark. He attended Chadwick Preparatory Academy for Boys, before going on to Cambridge University, and finally attending medical school at Johns Hopkins University. One day, while swimming at the beach, Dr. Sharkattack caused a total panic as frightened beachgoers fled the surf in terror. He had worked hard his whole life to break down the stereotypes, and now he was betrayed. He swam off into the sea and never paid off his student loans.
LIFELINES is a literary magazine featuring works of creativity and non-fiction from Dartmouth students and healthcare professionals, as well as current and former patients. The mission of LIFELINES is reflected in its name: to be a thread winding amongst all those who have been touched by the medical experience, and to weave a literary tapestry offering the much-needed creative outlet for doctors, medical professionals, and patients alike.