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Editors:

Saritha Tirumalasetty
Joseph Duren
Margaret Hilder
Tana Welch, M.F.A.
Janine Edwards, Ph.D.
Benjamin Kaplan, M.D.
José Rodríguez, M.D.

HEAL

Humanism Evolving through Arts and Literature

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The First Delivery

Caitlin Dunham, Class of 2013

Welcome, Baby

I felt you before I saw you. A firm roundness, rough beneath my gloved fingers, pressing just to the edge of my palm, your mother's cervix a whisper of satin ribbon about your head. "Eight centimeters?" I can't keep the anxious rise out of my voice. It's only my second day.

"Nine," came the crisp voice at my shoulder. "She's almost ready." P, the midwife, stands there: her words cheerful, her manner calm, her presence kind but firm for me and for your mother. It's not clear which of us is comforted more.

A sigh comes from behind the sheets as I withdraw my hand. Your mother's blood stains my fingertips. Her ordeal is far from over. Her hands and lips quiver with fatigue and anesthesia. "Your first?" I ask. She whispers in the affirmative. "Mine, too." I give her my gentlest smile, but she cannot see it with her eyes squeezed shut.

It's not long before I can see you. A tight curl: black, silken, sodden. You're bobbing like a cork, more of your scalp visible with each push before retreating again. Trickles of fluid, pink and orange, join the growing pool in the padding. I can see the whites of your father's eyes across the bed.

"What size gloves?" asks M, the lovely Irish nurse. She's fetched me from the call room, where I'd watched your tracings on the monitor above my bunk. I'm gowning, heart racing, sweat gathering at my hairline. You will make your appearance soon.

"I can't! I CAN'T!" Your mother is shrieking. "You CAN!" says M, "You MUST! Your baby will not come out unless you PUSH!" P is humming to herself as I arrive by her side. "It's all right, dear. You'll do just fine; just put your hands there and I'll help you." It's not clear whether she's talking to me or to your mother. She grasps her thighs. I grasp your head.

One last push! Your head emerges. You wear your cord as a necklace. My heart stops, or has time slowed? Am I trapped with you between heartbeats? P's knowing fingers slip your necklace off. I breathe again, and now, so do you. You are in my arms. P suction your mouth and nose. You cry. Your mother and father cry. I cry.

Your skin is gray and blue. I've seen it before: the lividity of death. Our color is the same as we enter and exit the world, it seems. Soon you are pink as a fingernail, your silken curls less sodden. Eight and nine according to M. Your mother thanks Jesus. I thank P. Your father doesn't speak at all, but smiles through his camera at you.

You are at your mother's breast. Your father strokes her hair and your feet. I slip away, skin prickling with receding adrenaline. The lullaby plays on the PA system.

Welcome, baby girl.

Marlboro, New York
José E. Rodríguez M.D.





The Unexpected Lesson

Collin Tully, Class of 2013

I thought I was strong.
I thought I would be able tell someone they were going to die.
I thought I could provide relief.
I thought I was strong.
I told a mother she had cancer.
I told her there was nothing we could do surgically.
I thought I was strong.
I told her the reaction was normal.
I told her we were here to help.
I thought I was strong.
I was the only person to see her until the next day.
I was asked if it could be anything else.
I told her again.
Everything is pointing to cancer.
Everything she was feeling was normal.
I thought I was strong.
I was asked what I would do.
I had dreamed about these discussions.
I thought I could help more than others.
I thought I was strong.
I told her this can be a difficult thing, a difficult time.
She said it was.
She told me, it must be difficult for you, too.
She said she saw it in my eyes the day before.
I thought I was strong.
She appreciated my lack of strength.

Old Dogs

Kristopher R. Shannon, Class of 2015

t.r.u.m.p.e.t.

Yaowaree Leavell, Class of 2015





The Unexpected Ride

Carlos Leon, Class of 2013

Medical school is a journey with its ups and its downs
Friends become family, smiles may turn into frowns

Ultimately it's a battle that everyone is ready to win
And here is a little story about how it begins

In undergrad, the preparation starts with many things to be done
This includes getting good grades, volunteering, and limiting fun

Then comes applications, personal statements, and interview invites
For many this includes researching affordable flights

Next is the MCAT which for many is rough
But nobody ever said medical school was easy, right? It's supposed to be tough

Some students will have many offers, others will have none
And just like that a new medical school semester will have begun

The first two years is full of lectures and books
Students will never forget all the hard work it took

There is so much information the student may not know where to start
But becoming a great doctor requires hard work, determination, and a good heart

After the boards, the excitement begins
Wearing our white coats together, we start to blend in

Into the hospitals we all go
Awaiting our patients whose histories are unknown

The relationships we build ultimately sharpen our craft
Some experiences will make us cry, some will make us a laugh

We quickly learn that diseases are no longer just words in a book
Sadly, they represent our patients and the lives that they took

The last two years is where the reality sinks in
Tough residents and attendings will thicken our skin

It's amazing how fast time really goes by
I am halfway through medical school in the blink of an eye

What lies next I am really not sure
But whatever it may be I am ready to endure

As future physicians we are privileged indeed
To serve our society and patients in need

Old Dogs (continued)

Kristopher R. Shannon, Class of 2015

White Birch

Nilda M. R. Keetch



In the Window

Carol Warren
Circulations

Who is the girl in the window
Looking at the rain
Or the reflection of tears
Running down the glass?
Reflecting the wishes of others
Is walking a tightrope
Between who I am
And who I seem.
You want me to be me
But you only see the me
You want me to be.
Ring around the rosy
The circle twists,
The chain of ME's
All fall down.
Which one is the one you love?
Who is the girl in the window
Looking at the rain
Or the reflection of tears
Running down the glass?

Praise to Fear

Eric Heppner, Class of 2014

I once feared loneliness, so I kissed a girl.

For fear of being trapped, I left her.

I feared dying young, so I ran round the world.

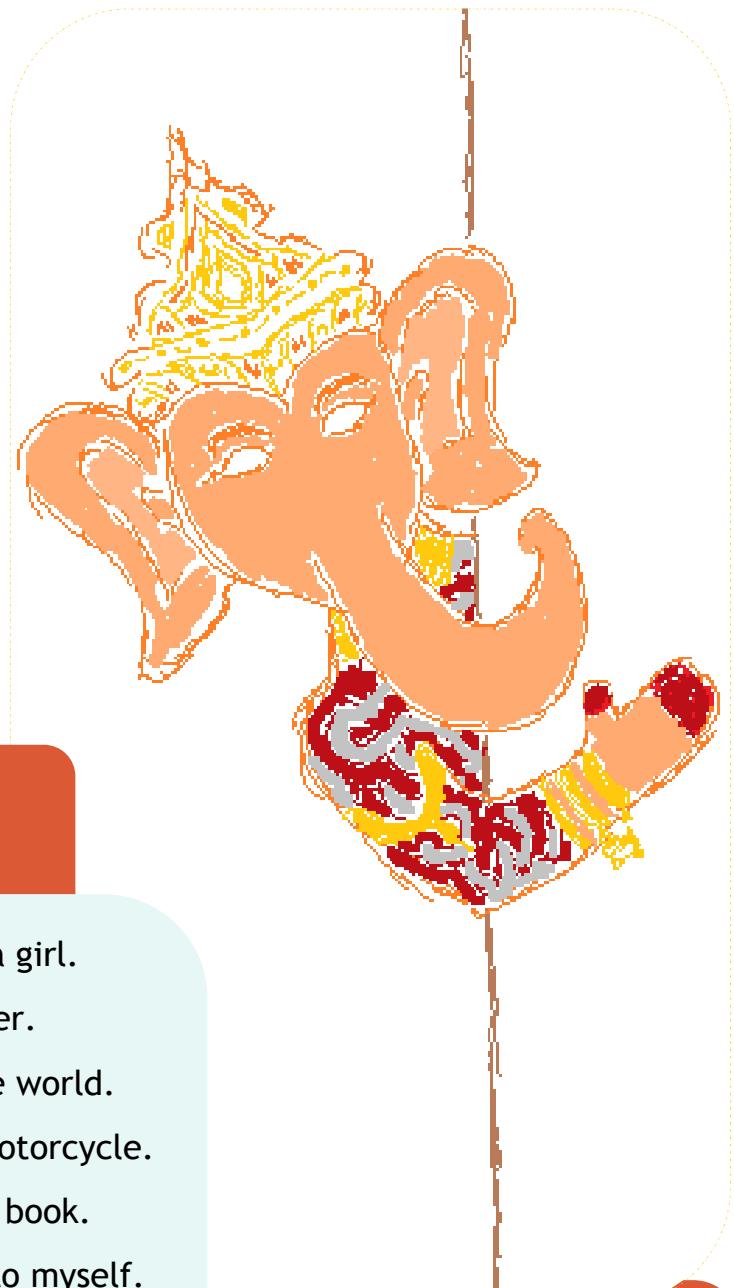
Then I feared dying old, so I did it on a motorcycle.

I feared being forgotten, so I wrote a book.

I feared being remembered, so I kept it to myself.

I feared fearing things, so I found myself.

Then I feared fearing nothing, so I found God.



Playful Ganesh

Saritha Tirumalasetty
Class of 2015

Laughter is the Best Medicine

Brittany Warren, Class of 2013

The room smells of death.
Will she open her eyes now?
Time to call the priest.

From a young age we are told that laughter is the best medicine. As training physicians, we soon discover that laughter falls short of treating every ailment. We spend two years in the classroom dedicating ourselves to the understanding of the human body and the diseases that plague it. Part of that training includes learning the drugs that will help to cure those diseases. At what point did we learn about laughter in Pharmacology? A once bright-eyed and eager to learn medical student can be quickly silenced as death strolls into their patient's room and takes them for its own. Wait, the books never told me how to handle that.

We spend so much time figuring out what's best for the patient often forgetting about ourselves. What's that old adage though? Laughter is the best medicine? This may be one of the most important lessons I will learn while in medical school. Sickness and death take patients hostage everyday on the wards. In order to keep from internalizing your feelings one must learn to make light of the situation. You learn to do everything in your power to help a patient, to keep them breathing, to keep their eyes open, but sometimes, your best is not good enough. This is when your patient has one foot out the door and your attending jokingly tells the resident to "call the priest." A joke? Now? When this first happened to me I sat there wondering how making a joke could ever be appropriate. Now, not only was the imminent death of the patient eating away at me, but so was the one liner. As my patient's face haunted my thoughts, my emotions began to overcome me. "You need to be stronger," I told myself; it was only my first day on the floor after all. At that point I thought of the one liner and a hint of a smile slowly etched itself across my face. It was then that I realized that the joke was not at the expense of the patient, but rather a form of self-preservation for the attending.

It was a hard lesson to learn and I am sure that it is a lesson with many layers that I will continue to grow from, but it was that day that I learned perhaps laughter can be the best medicine.



Drawing by Amy Hillard



The Poignant Platypus and Other Misadventures in Online Dating (continued)

Andrew Lane, Class of 2012

He needed a tagline. This appeared to be some sort of a marquee, a catchphrase if you will, that would beckon females to him through their computer screens. But what one sentence summed up his being? How to describe the depths of his soul, his longing to be held by the mother of his children? "Well off, thick coat, large burrow. Equal opportunity employer, if you know what I mean." Well, this is like advertising he thought to himself, they would discover the other things after they got to know him. This witty introduction pleased the platypus.

He still continued to check over his shoulder, just in case his cleaning mouse had decided to start her shift seven hours early. He could imagine her there, sitting in the shadows, basking in his humiliation: she would no doubt request a raise as payment for her silence. He calmed when he remembered she was still just a mouse. No one would notice if she went missing. He could always get another one. They were constantly coming over across from the Borders. The humans had built one along with the railroad and the mice found the woods behind it an ideal home. They all looked alike anyway, no one would notice.

The hours passed as the platypus sat typing and then re-typing what he hoped would be right combination of words to express himself. The scotch began to appear after the third revision of his hobbies. He kept the empty glasses stacked next to the laptop to track his progress. Should he include his fondness for collecting human coins he found while swimming for food? He thought it would

show his keenness for aesthetic beauty. After all, he wasn't just swimming, he was hunting for art and the world was his museum! But would this give the wrong impression? After all, a beaver should certainly never admit to collecting shiny baubles. There was still a buzz in the community from that year the platypus had rented a room to that loose-lipped weasel. The platypus thought this over deeply and repeated the mantra he always used when these thoughts came up: nothing happened, more scotch. He decided a general statement about his appreciation of the arts would be best. Satisfied with his penmanship he poured another glass.

The hazel color of his cocktail reminded him of another summer. His first true love was a house cat from the nearby human neighborhood. Oh she was amazing! Almond shaped green eyes, a beautiful black coat, and a silver tongue that could silence a mockingbird. An intriguing specimen no doubt! This brought back all the hushed mutterings and sneers from the judging eyes as they strolled along the banks of the river. Yes, she is a black cat. "What of it?" He would scream, white with rage! He scolded himself for succumbing to these racist thoughts.

But what if she really was bad luck? While he was on a date with her, the tide actually rose so high it washed away his burrow! And the whole nine lives thing? He was open minded but, come on, reincarnation? "My goodness!" He looked around to make sure there were no black cats in the room who might have overheard his careless mutterings. He decided to proclaim out loud that it "was her personality," just in case.

It was now approaching 2 AM or was it 4 AM? It was becoming hard to tell after all of those scotches. No matter, his masterpiece was near completeness. Before him were several categories of 1000 characters or less describing his greatest attributes, his triumphs, his legacy. Now, it was time to submit. With one click his humiliation would be made public. Would the dawn bring forth his future wife or would an acquaintance find him and snicker at the depths to which he had fallen? Would the others smile at him as he swam by in the river, relieved at knowing their lives were pathetic, but at least they didn't have to resort to online dating? The platypus didn't care anymore. He had come this far and was not about to turn back now. The platypus finished the last of his scotch, closed his eyes, and clicked. It seemed that in the end his fate would be determined by a mouse after all.

To Submit to HEAL email:

heal@med.fsu.edu

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