

Any poet who undergoes a Medicare audit is in serious trouble. Whereas physicians are required to painstakingly document all decisions with airtight reasoning; where medical treatment guidelines are recommended only after costly - tertiary, multi-centric, academic - “double-blind” study and subjected to rigorous statistical analyses, a good poem moves by leap and indirection to an unforeseen place, surprising. A good poem can be neither parsed nor disputed: “best-practice” or “evidence-based” cannot apply. Visions of a querulous government finger tracing down the page *tsk-tsking* over a far-fetched metaphor would startle the poet awake at night. How would one embrace the bureaucratic mask as it scans image after image, sorting the rhythms into like piles, where they are weighed and found wanting in the glare of “usual and customary”? Again that faceless finger, and the practiced but persistent request that the poem’s conclusion be more thoroughly justified... “*Like ice riding on its own melting*” would be inadmissible, irrelevant to a court of law.

In short, the Medicare auditors would find the putative thoroughness of the work-up “poorly documented”, and the “levelling” of the visitation “inadequately supported”.

These thoughts were my amusing companions the last months of Family Medicine Residency. I had been working to fulfill the new ACGME requirements for all Residency graduates to complete a scholarly project. Mine was a poem. In early September, I and my Residency colleagues gathered with the Director and Scholarly Advisor to share what our project was to be. Poems, for me, had always emerged from the pressures and welter of my own experience, hung still in the air for the moments of composition, and then resubmerged into the flow of life: my life subtly deepened, expanded, clarified. So when my turn came to speak I chose to drop all pretense and just say I wanted to write a poem. A poem about bread and its long history, apoptosis and yeast and fermentation; the one and the many, about choices made and things left behind; how we cycle through the celebrations of respiration and night. And the Civil War. Of course Keats, and Helen Keller. The sky-burial of youths afternoon, and who I still hoped to be...

The room was quiet for the moment. I felt flushed with the tumble of words and images I had unguardedly shared. The Scholarly Advisor leaned across the lacquered conference table: “*Did I hear you right? You want to go to Tibet, walk around in circles, and wake-up to the memory of baking bread?*”

*“Pretty much,”* I replied.

The poem had been germinating since the shock of my first anatomy exam in medical school. I had resolved in my early thirties to become a doctor. I had taken classes at a couple of liberal arts colleges (no sciences), and had spent most of a decade doing odd jobs, falling in and out of love, walking around, and reading and writing poems and poems and poems. I never had much of a plan for making a career out of poetry. I gave readings, made friends, and had some books published by a small arts press. The fact of a future and maybe a family began to dawn on me. It's a long story, but I resolved to become a doctor.

And that, at my residency graduation in 2009, was thirteen years previous. Facts and facts and justifications and treating or not treating and 24 and 36 hours without sleeping and remembering and forgetting with annihilating rigor had remade my life entirely. And as the conclusion of all my schooling and training neared, the underside of my apoptosis poem - my secret and private ambition - became more palpable. For it the purpose of apoptosis was acceptance of individual cell death of the sake of the greater wholeness, then the shadow brother had to be acknowledged: namely, Cancer. The cancer cell-line refuses to submit, refuses to make allowance for others and others and - in refusing - dooms the organisms' integrity to its own deranged singularity. Inhabiting the responsibilities commensurate with “doctor” I had come to think and orient myself in a way incomprehensible to the wind-swept poet who'd fantasized about introductory Biology classes, envisioning a distant life as a family doctor who wrote poems, like a modern day William Carlos Williams...

Both the same and a many-man, my life had taken on a different story. I ruminated on the years becoming a physician while I mulled over apoptosis and bread, the fundamental role dying plays in being alive. Of staying up all night writing poetry and staying up all night on-call and staying up all night caring for my newborn son and how all these strong and dark nights were done by a man with the same name but informed by different reasons and motivations. A man who drew on competing balances and - not infrequently - conflicted reserves.

I did my residency near Providence, Rhode Island. H.P. Lovecraft had been a teenage favorite of mine, and he lived and died and was buried there. Lovecraft's stories are stalked by ill-formed and shut-away things; visions of darkened rooms and backstairs; turgid waters. I believed he was buried in the beautiful Swan Point Cemetery above the banks of the Blackstone River. As

exercise and excuse (as well as relief for my wife) I took my three year old son to Swan Point for walks. He would run around, ahead, behind - a blur of blonde hair and Brownian motion - while I followed, watching over. First, phrases came to me and I tried them in my mouth and, as the walks added up, lines, stanzas and pages began to take shape. Looking vaguely or intently at the headstones I trusted I would someday stumble across Lovecraft's grave. And as the poem-making was halting at first - especially compared to my younger self when it was my only devotion - I had cause to dwell on what I had lost and on who was walking my son: a resident doctor, married with two children, wandering a cemetery in the wake of a three year old boy on the off-chance I'd come across the grave of a long-dead and unhappy man.

Apoptosis. Cancer. Bread.

And as my son more regularly asked and as I more regularly said "*let's go*" my composing became more fluent. The quasi-abstract themes of "cell-death" and "life" took on surprising flesh through the rhythms of our seeing, breathing and walking together. And far from needing to find out just *where* the man was buried I began to relish the incorporeal but inevitable paths we would take. He would climb trees, and I began to see those mornings and afternoons as integral to the composition of my poem - procession and method - and, more crucially, as a means by which I could rejoin the self who had taken such a crooked road to who I had become. The doctor would have tracked down the location of the grave, gone to it and moved on. The poet would not have had a child, and would have seen a three year old on a walk as a hindrance, not a portal.

I had changed, and could neither retrace nor recapitulate all the steps that I'd taken.

We walked through three seasons: Fall, Winter and Spring. Leaves fell, the earth turned, he grew. I went over what I had written and some of it was good. The themes were there, yet manifest in images and tropes I couldn't foresee at that meeting. Walking, I had had thoughts I didn't know I would think; I'd spoken aloud things I didn't know I'd be speaking; what I hadn't conceived had woven into my poem.

Doors had opened.

My son and I walked through them.