



**2023**  
**John J. Frey III, MD**  
**Writing Award Submissions**

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## 10 Months

This fall season is fairly bitter sweet  
While the leaves fall  
And it signals sleep  
It's bright leaves  
Signal the start of the celebrations  
Families gather  
Children dress up  
Both in costumes  
And other affair  
Some more willing than others.  
Time is taken away from the mundane  
Even if there isn't gathering,  
It's time to rest  
Muscles and minds alike.  
It's a time of giving  
Both of gifts and time  
But time seems to be more expensive.

And other seasons will come-  
Spring, the time of life and renewal  
I hope my time won't be overlooked  
While I may be alone  
I know you won't forget me.  
While I will grow and change  
And continue in my ways here,  
I can say I will be here.

I will open the windows  
And let some light in  
And on the nicest of days  
Let the air in  
To relieve this place  
Of being closed and dark for a season.

And while the seasons may change  
Our seasons of life will too.  
The future looks so bright  
And we will continue our life  
Somewhere new.  
And the trouble we have seen through  
Will be a mere glimpse of what is to come.

But I know this fall you will return to me  
just the same  
as you've always been to me.

## Three Thirty-Two AM: My Last Call

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay, I describe my last overnight call as I transitioned out of practicing obstetrics. I was worried that by giving up doing inpatient medicine and practicing obstetrics, I would lose my identity as a family physician. I realized that I can embody the core values of a family physician, including generalism and patient centeredness, in the office as well as in the hospital. Family physicians can stay true to their historical values even while giving up inpatient medicine and obstetric care by remembering that it is not only what we do, but how we do it that is important.

I hung up the phone at 3:32 AM. As calls go, it was relatively routine. The resident was calling to tell me about a woman she was sending home from triage because she was not in labor. In retrospect though, this call was momentous to me. It was possibly the last middle-of-the-night phone call about a patient situation that I would ever experience. At 7 AM that morning, the last overnight call of my career was over. I was not going to deliver another baby. I was not going to see another patient in the hospital. I lay back in bed that night after talking to the resident and had a hard time falling back to sleep. My stomach churned and my heart pounded as I wondered if I was making a mistake. Would I be a “real” doctor if I wasn’t on call or taking care of patients in the hospital? Some of my most fulfilling moments as a physician have come in the middle of the night, after a long labor, when I hear a newborn cry at the same time as everyone in the room has tears in their eyes. Being present during such an important moment in a family’s life has helped me create lifelong bonds with women in my practice. I have also treasured the intense time bonding with residents, talking for hours about their hopes and dreams. With a lurch, these experiences were coming to a close. And I wondered, after 27 years of practicing obstetrics, would I keep my identity as a family physician?

These questions continue to go unanswered even several months after my last call. I have worked in an academic setting at a residency clinic my whole career, where full-spectrum family medicine has included some type of inpatient care: medicine, obstetrics, or both. But I know that is not the norm for family physicians around the country. Estimates suggest that less than 15% of new graduates of family medicine residencies practice obstetrics.<sup>1</sup> I witness residents graduate each year choosing to work exclusively in urgent care, as a hospitalist, or do solely outpatient medicine. Part of me has always judged them, thinking that they are not practicing everything that we have taught them. Personally, though, I can now understand the desire to be available and present with both your patients and with your family. Limiting my practice scope will enable me, during this stage of my life, to balance responsibilities of young adult children and aging parents. As I have taken on more research and editing responsibilities, I realized that I, too, needed to contract my scope of clinical practice in order to maintain my work/life equilibrium. For several months before this last call, I had found that the balance between joy and stress while taking obstetrics calls had been changing. I was feeling more stress and less joy. It was time to make a change.

Such a choice brings up some challenging questions. What about generalism? What about seeing patients in all settings, from cradle to grave? Does limiting our practice threaten our specialty? According to Barbara Starfield’s 4 C’s of primary care<sup>2</sup> (first contact, continuity, comprehensiveness, and coordination), family physicians can practice generalism in a variety of settings and in different ways.



Generalism, in its literal sense, speaks to scope of practice, but in a more figurative sense, it can also refer to a broad approach to patient care. Paul Genberg, in an essay in a business magazine about generalism stated, "All knowledge builds on itself, and the generalist takes his suitcase packed full of wide-ranging experience with him wherever he goes, offering companies a tremendous amount of value."<sup>3</sup> Family physicians bring their unique view of the medical landscape and the comprehensiveness of their training to any patient care situation they face. It is that broad experience that underscores the role of family medicine as "counterculture."<sup>4</sup> In his groundbreaking essay about what makes family physicians different than other clinicians, Gayle Stephens, MD, describes how family doctors treat people, not diseases, welcome all patients into our offices, and work to improve health of communities.<sup>4</sup>

What makes a family physician? Is it what we do or how we do it that matters? I chose family medicine because I value taking care of all members of each family. It felt fundamentally wrong during my obstetrics rotation as a medical student that we handed the baby over to the pediatrician. I felt a sense of loss when I was no longer part of the care team that was treating the maternal-child dyad. The sanctity of that maternal-child bond has kept me practicing obstetrics my entire career. The feeling of "rightness" that I experience when seeing multiple generations of a family embodies to me what family medicine is at its core. At a recent well-child check for an 11-year-old girl, I was able to talk to her mother about her worries about her own mother (I take care of 3 generations of their family), and we came up with a plan to help her not transfer her anxiety to her young daughter. That all happened in a 25-minute visit.

We are patient centered, family centered, and community centered. We see people in the context of their daily lives, not as medical problems. And that can be done no matter the

setting. I can practice that type of care in any locale. I have trained hundreds of family medicine residents over the past 25 years and I hope that regardless of the setting in which they choose to practice, whether it be as a hospitalist, as an outpatient doctor, or at urgent care, they come to every patient visit with the same comprehensive and patient-centered attitude toward their patient.

I have to admit that I do not miss being in the hospital. In some ways, I feel relief to be absolved of so much responsibility. I am actually working more total hours, but in different ways.

This practice change is so new that I cannot fully comprehend how it will ultimately change me. But I will keep my commitment to patient-centered care, focus on the context of care, and on empowering patients to make healthy decisions. As I continue in my role as an outpatient family physician, I will strive to embody those principles and continue to train residents and medical students in the foundational values of family medicine.



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## “Expecting Uncertainty”

“The unexpected is our normal routine” - Commander William Riker, USS Enterprise-D (1)

Confidence in facing the unknown is admirably characteristic of the crew of the fictional starship Enterprise-D. Most family physicians, however, are more likely to identify with the ship’s doctor from an earlier iteration of the Enterprise, Dr Leonard McCoy, “a simple country doctor,” (2) who made it clear many times that “I’m a doctor, not a... engineer, bricklayer, mechanic, or escalator” (depending on the episode). A truly resourceful generalist, he nevertheless routinely faced scenarios well beyond his training and scope of practice.

As a generalist specialty, family medicine has long promoted dealing professionally with uncertainty and caring for patients with undifferentiated conditions. In 2004 the Future of Family Medicine (FFM) project boldly identified “comprehensive” care and “a natural command of complexity” as characteristic of family physicians. (3) A 2019 qualitative study with medical students confirmed the importance of role models who practice a broad scope of family medicine in attracting students to the specialty, (4) and a recent restatement of cross-specialty shared principles reiterated the importance of comprehensiveness in primary care (5).

Dealing with breadth and complexity by definition entails a commitment to dealing with uncertainty. I recall as a student being taught that the generalist specialties by nature tended to attract those with a higher tolerance for or comfort with uncertainty; unfortunately that assertion does not seem to have been validated in the educational literature, and Young et al found in 2022 no correlation between medical students’ comfort with uncertainty and whether they subsequently entered trained in primary care or family medicine. (6)

While it is admirable to aim for comprehensive care, and there are means to quantify the complexity of our patient panels, simply stating that family physicians are “natural” at dealing with complexity or uncertainty does not make it so. In fact, despite the vision presented by the FFM project, subsequent national efforts to refocus and redefine our specialty through the Family Medicine for America’s Health (FMAHealth) project (7) and the revisions to Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) residency standards (8) gave little attention to what it means to train generalist physicians for dealing with both complexity and uncertainty. Uncertainty in medicine has traditionally been considered in the context of clinical decisions, where we ponder issues of scientific uncertainty such as the precision of test results or the potential ambiguity of treatment outcomes. Dwan and Willig argue that we need to go further, realizing that issues of existential uncertainty apply not only to our patients but also to us as clinicians and caregivers – What does my life mean? What does it mean to live with "doubt about one's going-on-being"? What does it mean to live with "a present-oriented state that is influenced by perceptions of the past and future"? (9) Indeed, studies have shown that not only did the Covid pandemic disrupt the structures and schedules of medical education, (10) the ongoing uncertainty took an emotional (11) and cognitive (12) toll on learners and faculty during the pandemic.

It is important that we educate our learners (and ourselves!) to deal confidently with scientific uncertainty and flexibly with uncertainty in scheduling and planning, but there is a broader need to understand how we best prepare our learners (and ourselves) to deal with the existential uncertainty we face when the very assumptions, foundations and parameters of our socially organized reality become uncertain.

Evans and Trotter demonstrated in 2009 that primary care physicians with a biopsychosocial epistemology tend to have less stress when confronting uncertainty than do those with a biomedical epistemology, (13) and Ledford et al found that the seeking of social support may be one means for the reduction in discomfort with uncertainty that can come with increased practice experience. (14) Beyond these findings, however, the question remains as to how we can do better.

Taylor et al demonstrated that a curriculum incorporating specific readings, reflective writing, discussion, and ambulatory skill development using psychosocial and behavioral health tools can improve tolerance for ambiguity among family medicine residents (15) Schei et al call for dedicated work on reflection in medical education as a way to guide learners in managing complexity and the “messiness” of medical practice. (16). Tonelli and Upshur suggest that increased focus on the philosophy of medicine in medical education help learners with development of the language and reasoning skills to navigate uncertainty (17), and Ave and Sulmasy contend that attention to spirituality may help provide “a path to peace in the midst of the storm” and “a sense of faith in a transcendent presence that calls them to serve their patients and sustains them in that work.” (18)

Accuracy, precision and dependability are important professional standards for giving quality care, but recent and current events give ample reminders that we teach and practice in a world where uncertainty ranges from the scientific to the existential. It is important to be sure our clinical education teaches thoughtful ways to deal with measurement imprecision and ambiguity of guidelines. It may be even more important for us to continue to explore the ways reflection, narrative, philosophy, and spirituality may broaden our learners’ resources for facing the even deeper questions of existence.

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For those who don't choose how they suffer:

Upon our first meeting, you told me  
life is  
a crucible of demoralization  
(in a 20 minute slot)  
You knew  
- for sure -  
no body could help you and yet you came to me,  
defiant in your dare for me to take on the challenge.

You were hers. You loved her like I did, which made you mine.  
(challenge accepted)

You have taught me most  
About winding paths  
and the surprises they contain  
About how in supporting others  
when we are our most broken selves  
we fly  
Like a Phoenix, rising.

Jupiter's Great Red Spot—a high-pressure cyclonic storm, burning at 2400°F—was first spotted in 1664. America's Great Red Spot, however, wouldn't be discovered until the summer of 2020. That summer drifted in upon a red wind, for the world was on fire. Flames had engulfed the flesh of the society we once knew, scorched it to ash, and unveiled the putrid bones of which our nation was built upon. The COVID-19 pandemic spread like wildfire, claiming the lives of thousands across the nation. And while the debris and embers of the pandemic still clouded the sky, heat rising all around, another spark was radiant: May 25, 2020; the murder of George Floyd. A perfect storm—some might say—of fury and flame had left the American people having to reckon with the very foundation of the systems of which we so honorably uphold, while simultaneously having ignored the roots of their origins. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately claimed Black and Brown lives due to longstanding inequities that far predated the year. The murder of George Floyd was the most recent in a string of police homicides that the nation had grown accustomed to ignoring, waiting for it—like all the others—to get swept under the rug and forgotten. The pandemic coupled with another life taken by police brutality revealed the truth of the disparities and issues faced by Black and Brown Americans; the nation could turn and hide no longer...yet I found myself doing just that.

Despair had found me in the comfort of my home; I was ashamed, for I was not out fighting on the frontlines of anything. I came to the side of no one with pails of water to dampen the flames of the storm. No, I was at home, a tired pre-med student studying day and night at the kitchen table while I watched the world aglow from my window. An immunocompromised mother and a need to study kept me locked inside with only a journal to turn to:

*Her lungs filled with air, expanding with a fullness of life that, for more than a moment, she despised herself for. The force of mourning warranted the release of the air she had stolen.*

*For 21 years she had been breathing. She never paid it any mind. She had thought her breath, her air, was hers alone. She took it for granted.*

*Her youth had granted her naivety. She had not known that the air that kept her alive was the same that she shared with her kin, both blood and in spirit. It was never hers alone to keep.*

*Yet, selfishly, she dared breathe now while she watched the news, flooded with #BLM and marches. She breathed again when she hid her face from it. She continued breathing as the world around her burned, as her city puffed up and fell to the ground in a cloudy, ashy haze, as people marched, protested. She even dared breathe now, in the comfort of her home, her television inflamed,*

*Her lungs filled with the air of someone's last breath.*

I wrote those words three years ago, an ode to my sentiments at the time, a certain survivor's guilt. Yet, I took practice test after practice test, locked away in my steel fortress preparing for the MCAT. They had said it was one of the most important battles I'd ever have to win, finishing that test, and I believed them; I had dedicated myself—my future career—to the betterment of people through health and healing, but whose wounds were I healing now? As a Black person, I felt so selfish in my endeavors. People were hurting across the nation, a time when my voice felt needed more than ever, and I

was studying for an entrance exam that couldn't have felt more irrelevant when so many people were suffering.

I told myself—a half-truth—that I'd be of more use to the world as a physician, and I couldn't become one without succeeding on this test; what I was doing was necessary to achieve my larger goal—I had to play the long game, and so I promised to not forget that summer, to not forget the innocent lives that had been lost, to not ignore the issues that not only impact me, but the thousands of Black and Brown individuals who live the reality of the Great Red Spot each day. This storm was new in the eyes of the nation, but it wasn't new to us. I promised to remember that truth, and with that, I reopened my Kaplan book to learn once more, the Krebs Cycle.

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The summer of 2023 came quickly, much to my surprise. A year of medical school completed, I felt one step closer to making good on the promise that I had created nearly 3 years prior. The debris of America's Great Red Spot had been dealt with, in some ways, although we still hadn't a clue of how to dispose of it; as division had become the normal way of life, conversations around damage control were no exception.

The pandemic had slowed down, although it was far from nonexistent. Many individuals chose to still don masks in public, while others threw away their boxes of surgical masks at first chance. Universities nationwide were ramping up their diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility departments, while some schools were shutting down these departments entirely. We as a nation had grown so far apart that a shared goal seemed to be a thing of dreams and nothing more, gone as soon as you opened your weary eyes in the morning and stepped into the reality of which we all know.

This division was made law on June 29, 2023, the day the Supreme Court voted against the long-held ruling of Affirmative Action in using race as a contributing factor of college admissions. In the distance, not too far away, I could see the storm reigniting, a little patch in the sky of sweet blue turned orange; we were headed back towards destruction.

I recalled a moment that occurred a few months back. I was working with my preceptor, still trying to understand the art of the patient interview. I entered the room, began dialogue as usual. The patient, an older Black gentleman, was a personality I had grown to appreciate in the clinic. I admired his attention to his health, and his cheerful presence as we discussed his work life and diabetes status, among other things. He reminded me something of my own grandfather. At the end of our conversation as I thanked him for our chat and prepared to leave the exam room, he told me he was proud of me. "I really am," he said to me. "I don't see too many of *us* in these roles. Keep going."

Us. United in this moment, I was reminded of the privilege it is to bear this skin in these spaces of which I was never foreseen to be in, for me being in this role is to empower and comfort patients with their care; it is to make visible the sacrifices and hardships endured by my predecessors, their actions and achievements woven into each thread of my white coat. His words were a reminder of the work done by those before me to open the door for me to be in *that* room, serving *this* patient, and I pay homage to them through the work that I've done and will do. Furthermore, his words were a testament to the need for diversity within the medical field. Today, I can't avoid the unquestionable fear that comes with wondering if this privilege afforded to me would be allowed to others who look like me.

Affirmative Action has been far from the only viable solution needed to create true representation and diversity within our institutions. However, it has opened the doors for bright minds to opportunities

and achievements that they may have otherwise not been able to enjoy. Affirmative Action through racial application decisions was a federal attempt at righting the wrongs that this nation has placed on minorities who have historically been barred from achieving greatness due to a lack of access. But on June 29<sup>th</sup>, I heard the sounds of so many open doors closing, their slams radiating through my core. I envisioned the faces of the talented, underrepresented students who may never get the degree of their dreams, the students—like me—who would one day go on to become doctors and give back to their communities, give hope to the patients whose skin they share, if only given the chance. But, in some ways, that chance was taken from them, and I wondered how many students would now be prohibited a reprieve from their own Great Red Spots.

On the park bench, I found myself feeling as I did 3 years ago. Despaired, hopeless, the world seemed so flat. One-dimensional, it told me in an instant that my experiences were not worthy of consideration for higher education, that my value was numerical and anything more was unimportant, easy to disregard. I felt seen that day with the patient. Now, I once more felt invisible, as if I was fading into the background of an end scene, ending the chapter of minority progression in academia. Our nation operates by taking two steps forward, one step back; progress is sparse and accompanied by an ever-looming threat that it could disappear in an instant. And, in the case of Affirmative Action, it did. Although I presently shared these sentiments with my past self, this time, I did not hide from the truth. I had made the promise that I wouldn't forget. That this time, I would move forward down the path. I fear that with the rollback of Affirmative Action that the opportunities of working in the field of medicine are dwindling for underrepresented students. I fear that all of our progress is always subject to change, never guaranteed to stay...but these are all just fears.

The truth lies deeper within. The truth lays within me, my 16 other Black classmates, the whole of the underrepresented students, staff, and faculty at this university and every other. We all carry our Great Red Spots, as granted to us by societal disparities and undue influence, but our positions and experiences *are* valuable. I am not numerical. I am dynamic. My experiences are real, and they are me, as I am them. Although this truth is no longer federally recognized, we can realize this to be true within ourselves and our peers. I long for a day where I don't have to cling onto a patient's pride in me, where I don't have to carry what feels like the weight of the future on my shoulders alongside my peers, but that day is not yet here, and until it comes, we must use the stories of our storms to speak up and speak out, to push back and educate. We as a nation may have taken yet another step backwards, but we as members of this field can be the ones to move us two steps forward.



**Loved**

**I felt love**

**It percolated through the years**

**Sometimes the sure and steady drip so slow I confess it went unnoticed**

**Or maybe I was so steeped in it I took for granted the gift**

**No matter, now I see its impact**

**And now with you gone I want to live that love**

**To give that love away**

**Slow and steady**

**Completely**

**Just as you taught me**

**Sometimes with words, mostly with action**

**So that one day the influence of your life on mine will reach parched lands  
many miles and years from the time we shared**

## Newborn Rounds

We wrap the newborn tightly  
hoping to swaddle his tears  
more than his arms.

The newborn  
newly emerged  
from a womb  
where they were never cold  
they were never hungry  
never wanting  
never had to ask  
for anything.

We place him back in his mother's arms  
and learn  
they have no home;  
the baby's father died last fall  
in a midnight accident  
rushing home  
from working  
away.

Why was I in such a hurry?  
Why did I keep moving  
why didn't I sit another minute  
why didn't I rock the baby  
a little longer?

Did I know  
my passing moment of attention  
the strong hold beneath my fingertips  
could not make up  
for all that was gone,  
forever,  
could not fill  
this deep crevice  
of loss?

Some think they can't understand  
our words  
our gestures  
our fears  
our love

yet this newborn looks at me  
with big eyes  
wide open to the world  
and seems to see and know everything  
we do not.

***Sonnet for a northern Minnesota night***

*The summer's days are long and bountiful,  
though not so long as to stave winter's hold.  
We laugh, we sing, we gather to this fold;  
embrace these hours wherein we seek to lull  
amidst the pinewood forest where we dwell.  
These days, this place ignore we all grow old;  
yet in our age chance wisdom to unfold  
and in this time arrange soft words to tell.  
The fires of rage erupt across the world;  
betray the quiet of this unspoiled place  
with the furies of isolation fanned  
and banners of disharmony unfurled.  
Against this stands the gift of nature's grace;  
its solace of water, tree, sky, and sand.*

I felt the sun break through the layers of trees above me while the wind gently rocked my hammock to the sound of the rustling leaves and waves crashing into the nearby rocks. The smell of fresh moss wrinkled my nose. How I had discovered this spot was a mystery to all, but it was my favorite hiding place. The entrance of my safe haven was exactly 116 meters from the start of the lakeshore path. Each time I climbed down the short drop, I had to use my free hand to comb my way through a spider web. Three steps from the perched rock was the first tree I used to mount my hammock. I imagine that most children would describe its color as brown, but striving aristocrats would eagerly report the tree's color as a marrying of clay and cedar, exposing the naturalism of a mixed society. If we could all just be more like children...

This would be my last time here before traveling back home. I hadn't been home since I was born. My conception was a fluke. The result of one too many shots of vodka, a cheap hotel room after prom, and two eager teens. And just like that, I committed my first robbery. Pieces of my parents dreamed success was wrapped and thrown away with each of my diapers. I responded with giggles and bubbles of spit because stealing my parents future placed me in the hall of fame of all burglars; how couldn't I celebrate? They had had enough of my joy and dragged me to the boat to send me across the waters to the island where I would be the overlooked orphan, Sombre or Bre for short. In the dark, I would create images of my mom. Tracing my finger along my face, I would imagine that she had a face identical to mine. I couldn't see her though.

I sighed as I heard Ray's boat approaching. I got out of my hammock and walked until small waves of water washed over my toes. I was usually barefoot because my feet were reliable for warning me of sudden changes in the terrain, keeping me from danger.

"Bre! Ready to ride first class in the prettiest boat on the water?" Ray chuckled as he cut the engine.

"Even blind, I can see your boat is subpar housing for roaches in the orphanage." I handed him my suitcase and pointed in the direction where he could find the rest of my luggage.

He groaned, "We're going to have to leave that stuff here, there's no space on this boat or back home for all your stuff".

I weighed my options in my head. Keep my baggage and forfeit the procedure that would give me sight or set sail across the ocean with little to nothing.

Ray sensed my hesitation and lugged me onto the boat. "You won't miss any of that stuff once you are home. Let's go!

The engine grew louder and my teeth chattered when the wind reminded me I was now on water. I rested my head on my suitcase and braced myself for the life waiting for me at home.

Ray met me a few years ago, in what most would consider an unfortunate circumstance. I had just finished my last year of high school and I was sitting against the brick wall of the place I called Hell High. My face was tight from the salt of my dried tears. I thought this moment would be filled with more freedom, more joy. But, instead I still felt trapped in the ruins of my classmates' impressions and betrayal.

I heard rustling coming from nearby.

"How long have you been standing here?" I buried my face into my knees and hugged my shins.

"Long enough to know you sniffle twice before exhaling deeply. I know you would rather your tears stream down your face than end up on your sleeves." His voice moved closer, "And long enough to have heard your stomach rumble seven times. Let's go eat."

I grabbed his hand and felt the years of wisdom and hard work plastered in his calluses. Before we began walking, he pulled me into his chest where the strength of his heart chambers filled my eardrum. I felt his beard tickle my forehead. His embrace felt familiar and warm. It filled me better than the parts of any of the boys I had invited inside of me. In that moment, I melted to my knees and time passed as the creases in this man's skin caught each of my tears.

"I'm Bre" I whispered through hiccups.

"Very nice to meet you Bre, I'm Ray" he laughed.

The wind pulled me out of my dreams and the present moment welcomed me with the rhythm of rain striking the ocean. The darkness of the night wrapped itself around me. Ray had stopped the engine and I felt his body next to me. The boat was no longer moving forward, but it tipped generously from side to side, threatening to submerge us.

"Ray, what's happening?" terror tore through my body "I thought we weren't going to hit any storms?".

The boat tilted 60 degrees and gravity pulled me to the floor of the boat where I slid to the other side. I heard splashing as the boat emptied its contents into the water.

"Ray", I tried to scream over the howling wind. I couldn't hear anything. I crawled and scaled the boat screaming for my friend, until all I could do was ball myself up and turn to a corner of the boat. I wept with my face pressed against the floor to allow my tears to mix with the salty water that had begun to fill the boat. I began to softly hum as this makeshift cradle rocked me to sleep. I desperately wanted to dream. To dream of home, of Ray, of the image I made of my mother in my head.



The boat continued to fill with water but I didn't move, so small amounts of water burned my nostrils with each inhale. Still, I found myself dreaming and transporting myself to a world where storms didn't exist. Suddenly, my ears filled with the tune I hummed to myself earlier and I felt myself rise in the air with the tilt of the boat and fall gently into the ocean. My chest tightened as I welcomed the water into my lungs. In the midst of water replacing the air in my lungs, I felt a surge of warmth wrap my body. And the sound of the ocean beat in the rhythm of Ray's heart. My body went limp and I began to rise.

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Her thready pulses tapped lightly against my fingertips. I held her with one arm and used the other arm to steer the boat. I was with her throughout the entire storm. My heart ached as I watched her fight, search for me, and then surrender to the water.

I called out to her to come to me, but she couldn't hear me over everything else. Or maybe she didn't recognize the name I called her by. Her original name. Daughter.

## Transcendent Teacher

Your loved one may be gone,  
but his impact goes on.  
He once taught future pharmacists,  
and now he is teaching future doctors.

From the importance of drug interactions  
to the order of our nerve branches,  
from the intricacies of receptor signaling  
to memorizing how our blood is flowing.

from the lecture hall  
to the anatomy lab,  
he helps us recall  
the most important material of all.

From pharmacy students to medical students,  
his influence has gone far and wide.  
Although he has moved on,  
his legacy continues on.

## Traveling by night

I attended your funeral  
last night  
while I was sleeping.  
I was wearing those heels  
I wore to your brother's wedding.  
The ones that pinched my toes  
when I was too young  
to know I didn't need to squeeze my feet  
into narrow straps  
to be worth looking at.  
When I was too young  
to know that sometimes it's better  
not to be watched.

I hugged your mom  
and told her I was sorry.  
She missed your funeral too,  
too busy  
doing whatever the dead do.  
She was kind to me,  
when I was too young  
to know I couldn't save you  
from the demons you met before  
I loved you.

Some of my favorite patients are alcoholics  
too. But I worry  
about the people who love them,  
the people who bring them to me.  
I feel their despair  
describing the thud, the blood  
that pooled on the bathroom floor.  
I feel their rage  
wilt with the promise of one more chance.  
Sometimes I smell the smoke  
curling from under your apartment door  
in my exam room,  
from that forgotten pizza that demanded I pay  
attention, while you lay unconscious.

Sometimes I wonder if you  
would have picked me,  
if I had asked you to choose  
between the bottles and the life you imagined  
for us. Sometimes I have to try not to feel guilty  
I didn't let you.

I left you  
when I was too young  
to know I wasn't leaving you.  
I was just headed somewhere.

I woke up last night  
tucked under a fluffy white comforter.  
I kissed my husband  
on his freckled shoulder,  
crawled out and checked on my children,  
one, two, three.  
I padded downstairs, and pulled  
out a box. I set aside  
my graduation cap and a stack of rumpled essays,  
and exhumed the album from our first trip together.  
The one where we followed stony fences through  
kelly-green fields and you held my hand on a train  
that was headed somewhere on a rainy afternoon.

I looked at you  
looking at me.  
And *I* looked at me  
when I was too young  
to know I was headed this way instead.

### Up The Stream

I felt the stream rush from the pool of my deeply sunken eyes. The tears rolled down the sides of my face and wet my ears. My head being immobilized by a neck brace left me to use only my peripheral vision to see the bright flashes of her white smile against her dark skin. I went back to a time when I was that excited for life.

The smells of saffron and wild mushrooms filled my dimly lit studio. I left the window open...I was waiting on the train to arrive to begin setting the table. I looked at the clock on the wall, it was a quarter after 6. The sound of metal scraping the train tracks washed over the sounds of "Jailhouse Rock" and children's playful screams that just a moment before were seeping in from outside. I shut the window just as I heard the train slowing into the station. Setting the table was my favorite part.

I carefully sculpted the potatoes, leaving a hollow center where I placed neatly sliced chicken breast. I covered it with one line of gravy and garnished it with parsley. I sat down and grabbed the letter, ready to share my acceptance into culinary school with the love of my life. A few minutes passed and I didn't hear her footsteps. One hour. And then three.

She called me from the pay phone just outside her job during her lunch. Everything was fine. I gripped a glass of water and sat in the sill of the window. I jolted from my spot as I heard the knock at the door and my cup fell from the grips of my fingers crashing against the floor leaving the water streaming through all the crevices of old wood that lined the floor. I opened the door.

The first thing I saw was his black shoes. My eyes flowed up the legs of his blue pants to his round belly, covered by his hand empathetically gripping his police hat. I watched his mouth move, only hearing the words struck, car, unfortunately, and sorry. I closed the door and turned only slightly to stare out the window. With each train that passed, my memories of Naomi grew fonder.

I watched the sun rise over Naomi's plate of food and the folded letter of the life I once knew. I trudged down the steps to the trash filled streets and walked for miles until I landed at our favorite diner where the sun set over a plate of stale fries and an oversalted fried chicken breast. We came here every Saturday and I used to scarf down this meal before the waitress could come back to check on us a few minutes later. Now, the meal seemed to taunt me, leaving me scared to take a bite.

I walked out into the street and sat on the curb of the sidewalk. After a few hours, I stood up and turned to face oncoming traffic. I had to do something; I couldn't be here anymore. I inched closer to the edge of the sidewalk and slowly, I lifted my arm and stuck out my thumb. I got into the first semi that passed and made my way across the country to some place named Madison in the middle of Wisconsin.

He said he was dropping me off downtown, but the tallest building here was only a few stories high. The streets were spilling with students smoking cigarettes and talking about the

war. My eyes scanned the sidewalks, trees, brick walls, and everything else until they landed on a help wanted sign for Mickie's Dairy Bar.

I was greeted by the aroma of applewood smoked bacon and the rhythmic hums of conversations going on between families sitting at the booths that lined the walls. I claimed the last open seat at the bar and eaves dropped on the old men sitting next to me debriefing about some college football game. The machinery like movement of the wait staff and cooks catapulted me to the life I once knew. The familiar view that once gave me life, left me feeling void and empty.

My first few days of work were hard. I was a cook, but I felt like an imposter. Without Naomi, I didn't have the same fire for food. The sounds of the kitchen lost the melody that once made it music. The vibrancy that once lived in the color of the foods had faded. And the only smells that lived in my nostrils belonged to burnt bacon. Months went by and I was demoted to a busboy. I found it hard to do just about any and everything, especially going to work. The only thing that kept me going was the bar down the street from my apartment.

One night at the bar, I met a couple that proposed a business plan: buy old computers and sell the parts to large tech companies. It sounded ridiculous, but I didn't have much else to live for. I agreed to join them in their work, and I never showed up to Mickie's again.

When I bargained my first computer purchase, I felt powerful. I felt even better when I talked the tech company into purchasing the parts for a much higher price than what I paid for them. Deal after deal, I grew the fiery passion for life that I once had.

I moved from downtown to a quiet suburb and bought a car. Our business grew. We survived Y2k, 9/11, and the Bush administration. But then, 2008 came and people were losing their jobs, the tech companies were closing, my house was foreclosed, and I found myself sitting on the curb again. Lost. Unsure about life. I needed to leave again.

I reached in my bag and shuffled around until I found it. I poured them all out into my hand. I put them in my mouth, all at once. I washed every pill down with a swish of cognac. My eyelids stopped fighting against the force of gravity, my body surrendered, and my face abruptly met the cold wet concrete. My last thoughts in that moment were of Naomi, the highs from a life I once knew, and the sweet smell of my favorite meal.

"Mr. Johnson?" she whispered. I blinked. Sending a single tear streaming down the left side of my face.

I motioned for her to continue with her questions.

"Can you tell me more about what brought you in today?" she said through a gentle smile.

I could only hope that my tears would tell the story my mouth refused to relive.



# Forget-me-nots

Melanie Biegler

Forget-me-nots

From seed,

And also from yesterday—

I washed myself in color

So you would notice me

And painted roses on my cheeks

To please you.

I grew roots within your shoes

And branches to carry you

As you picked my leaves

And watched them grow dry.

You sat in my presence

Of pleasant scents

And giving shade

When what I really wanted

Was for you to see me,

For I was already filled with sunshine.

And really if I speak

With offerings of honesty

What I really wanted

Was for you to

Forget me not.

She forgot

That he was gone

Though

She must have known

Somewhere in her bones

that he was missing.

She asked hesitantly

As if she knew the answer

But could not place it—

Stuck on an illness

That ailed him many years ago

But had no relation to his passing.

It came as an after thought,

That seemed to always live

In the outskirts of her mind

But

It was not the repetition

Of hearing her son had lost

That left my heart in two

For soon after

She bore that heart ache

At least the sharpness

Would fade for time.

But rather my father's heart—

That each time fell open

With her asking

As he lost his brother

And his mother

Time and time again.

"After thoughts of dementia"

Melanie Biegler