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Writing Award Submissions

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This symbol indicates this submission was selected for an award

A Change of Heart

By Caitlin Regner, MD

Do I want to breastfeed?
That's for a different kind of breed
Because my mom never nursed
And I didn't try it with my first
No, breastfeeding is not for me
A bottle's fine, don't you agree?

*

Do I want to breastfeed?
No thanks, I can't do that deed
It's not natural, it's not right
It's sexual, dirty, and trite
You know, breasts are made for lust
A bottle is just fine for us

*

Do I want to breastfeed?
Thanks for the stuff you gave me to read
About the benefits of the breast
I never knew it could protect,
Prevent illness, help her grow
Let me think, I'll let you know

*

Do I want to breastfeed?
I might have to, I concede
There's no formula in the store
I'll try for a bit, but then no more
I can pump, yes, that seems best
But I won't put her on my breast

*

Did I try to breastfeed?
Yeah, she latched by nurses' lead
Now I'm pumping, doing well
She's getting milk and it's not hell
I expected it to be worse
But I still won't let her nurse

*

Are we still going to breastfeed?
Funny you ask, for I agreed
To finally put her on the breast
And together, we did a test
She gets more milk, it just makes sense
And though it's something I'm against
We'll feed this way awhile more
Maybe this is what breasts are for?



a million

what is a
million? we know
we home four
cats—and that
is a lot, plus
two dogs, one a
triple cancer
survivor—she is
slowly dying—at
16 & a half
years, and that
is a lot, and a
white-footed
mouse that we
fed formula
with a syringe. she
is 4 & a half—old
for a mouse—
that is a lot. I’ve
been married
once—still am—
and, sometimes, after
almost 35
years, that seems
like a lot.
I am a family
doctor. I get paid
well; not a million,
not even close
but it seems
like a lot (some days
too much)

a million
caskets, end to
end, my house
—in Wisconsin—
to Salt Lake
City. imagine
the road of
mahogany, stainless
steel, pine. 28 inches
wide...23
inches high...

and
along that
road, lining the
margins, stand
the “bereavement
multipliers” (this I
read in a
reputable journal):
9 million strong
or weak or
devastated
or just
numb

5,882 737s
falling from
the sky, I
imagine
families
awaiting the
reading of
the manifest

392 World
Trade towers
reduced to
rubble and
dust and
legacies of
hatred

this is your
f___ing hoax
your ‘just the
flu’
your jiggering
of the
numbers
to fit
your
twisted
narrative



Regarding the Snow Peas

There is something deeply healing about getting your hands in the dirt and truly connecting with the authentic, living world that we inhabit. It can keep you grounded. It is a reminder that the world goes on. A trip to the garden ignites a nurturing spirit and a sense of pride that is a balm for the soul.

Being a fairly new gardener myself, I can't offer the knowledge or wisdom that comes with decades of growing; but I can share a simple truth I've learned so far. The key to gardening isn't having a green thumb. In fact, I'm not convinced that such a thing even exists. Rather, the key is simply paying attention and being curious about what you find. Plants talk; you just have to listen. Wilting leaves signal the need for water, whereas yellowing leaves can identify soil that lacks nutrients. Holes in leaves and mysterious larvae demand investigation.

I spent a lot of time in the dirt this summer. As part of my summer research exploring nutrition security in my local community, I had the opportunity to work in a food pantry garden which donates 100% of its produce to local pantries. I also engaged with community partners in the emergency food network and assisted with patient care in clinic. While at the garden, I reflected on my first year of medical school and took stock of the important things in my life. I considered different balancing acts that I could pursue this fall that might help me keep up with my interests and commitments as my medical training intensifies. But really, most of my time under the sun – seeding the snow peas, weeding the onions, and harvesting strawberries – was realizing just how large the intersection between gardening and medicine is.

With my first year of medical school in my rearview mirror, the options for specialties are very broad. I intend to keep an open mind to opportunities that present themselves, however, I feel I have found a home with Family Medicine. The beauty (and challenges!) of longitudinal care and watching patients as they grow and change over time is not dissimilar from the evolution from cotyledon leaves to mature foliage. Different stages of life will bring up new joys and hardships that should be handled with compassion and care, by the physician and the gardener.

There are some things you can control as a gardener, but most of the magic in the garden is beyond your control. The best you can do is give the plant every possible advantage by preparing the soil, trying different solutions to keep pests at bay, and removing weeds that may be stealing water, nutrients, and sun. And then, all you can do is watch the plants grow – with a curious eye – and deal with new challenges as they arise.

Substitute physician for gardener and patient for plant in the paragraph above, and the intersection between gardening and medicine will become clear. Change soil to the social determinants of health, pests to disease, and weeds to barriers blocking a patient's path to health and wellness.

Different plants have different needs, much like different patients do. One patient might be able to lower their blood pressure with lifestyle changes alone, while another may require three to four medications. It's also easier to deal with one aphid feasting on your basil plant compared to a hungry swarm. From my experience so far, an important part of medicine is focusing on prevention rather than treatment, empowering your patient with knowledge and resources, and then letting your patient take the lead.

I think the most important commonality is patience – both as a gardener and a physician. I remember planting an entire plot of snow pea seeds at the end of May. I was excited about the future seedlings that would emerge two weeks later. But I was also nervous – what if the soil dries up before germination? What if I planted the seeds too deeply that the sunlight would be too far out of reach? Part of me wanted to just zip through those next few weeks and see if the seedlings would sprout. But I realized that nature takes time, life takes time. There is no fast forward button. Lifestyle changes, chronic disease management, among other challenges, take time and require thorough follow-up. Throughout June, I helped to weed and water the seedlings, giving them the best possible chance to grow into hardy mature plants. Now, almost two months later, the first snow peas are beginning to emerge on beautiful, green vining plants. While the outcomes are not always as bright and sunny in clinic, celebrating the wins (big and small) with patients is the culmination of patience and incremental progress.

While we frequently discussed the health benefits of eating well in lecture, my work this summer has inspired me to jump aboard the Food is Medicine train in a more intentional way. I believe food access, specifically produce planted and tended in local soil, is an area I can focus on that has a direct impact on patient and community health. As I move forward in my training, I hope to prioritize trips to the garden to visit my snow peas, to nourish my soul, and to remind myself that life moves on outside the walls of the lecture hall, the library, the hospital. Gardening has become a place where a hobby, medicine, and community engagement intersect, and I hope that being able to return to the garden will sustain me when the flashcards pile up, the charting seems endless, and the roadblocks drown out the wins. With the renewal the garden provides, whether in the twisting tendrils of the snow peas or the fragrant waft from the basil, my soul can truly be recharged.

Should I stay or should I go?

Colleagues, family, patients ask, Are you going to retire?

Logical steps from high school to college to medical school to residency and a job.

Should I stay or should I go?

What is the risk benefit ratio?

Who is sharing decision making?

Where are the evidence based guidelines?

Should I stay or should I go?

Spring *'* again

And the trees are blooming *'* again,
Amongst a mass of people dying,
And I gaze over the brick of my porch
Carrying on like nothing is happening.
It is spring*'* again –
And the gloom still feels the same
As the gray of last winter,
Amongst a mass of people dying.

*Fall, turning, fall

'Spring, blooming, spring

the healer's illusion

Even Lazarus—intrepid
Traveler across
inviolable bounds, pious
Soul, devoted to a
T, subject
no. 3 (at least you
had a Name)—Even
Lazarus
had to die.

What
was it? a year, perhaps
2, maybe 5; 20
at best. no matter. Dead...
was it a miracle? a Bad
joke? a temporal
sleight of hand? more
the pleasant
Disguise of illusion.

Your reward, or was
it a payment:
(had to live)
got to die
twice. and did that
stench—4 days, man,
in a dank,
sealed cave—
ever
depart as
you did (again)?

Even Lazarus
had to die;
the Healer moves
on.
this gentle
tension
of Biology
and faith.



The Pronouncement Exam

It's quiet once they've left.
The room feels a kindred spirit,
No longer an answer
When I call out their names.
Their hands feel of lightness –
A remembrance of warmth,
Without response to my touch.
They sound of static
And faint echoes,
The napes of their necks still and calm.
If family lingers,
They have had their tears –
I am the latecomer.
But when it's just I,
A fullness still waits
Watching as I announce their last moment,
Even after it's passed.
Their eyes are last,
Looking at another place.
Time of death:
To an empty room.



“The Ride”

Teeter totter
Up and down
You play your game
Another round
Of thoughts and feelings
High, then low
Anxious worries
Overflow
No giving up
Continue to try
Teeter totter
Down then up high
Keep moving forward
Just get ahead
It's hard to do
When you're in your head
Teeter totter
Get to the top
Perhaps this time
The ride will stop
But after a moment
Of time in the air
You feel yourself fall
It's just not fair

Teeter totter
Riding anew
Now there's another
Riding with you
Ups and downs
Same as before
Feels a bit different
You cannot ignore
Bearing your weight
The ups and the downs
Are easier now
Less time on the ground
Teeter totter
Feeling free
The ride is smooth
And almost happy
Continue to ride
Short pause at the top
You don't care as much
About when it will stop
And as you go on
The ride does not end
But is much improved
By the gift of a friend



Before you

I remember a time before you
When surety ruled
And my life was just my own

I remember the days of adventure
Of even-keeled stagnance
Of time spent easily, without thought

I remember a time before size 2 diapers
Before gripe water, baby Tylenol
And incessant Google searches
“Is it ok if...”

I remember speaking with conviction
Of thinking I knew what came next
Awash in the comfortable arrogance that accompanies late youth
Borne not from time and experience, but lack thereof

I remember breathing into the darkness
Into a pause so vast I could not feel its end
Waiting for a whimper, or the quiet embrace of sleep

And someday, I will remember you now
While you sleep soundly, rump to the sky
In a position your bedtime book describes as “squirrel pose”

I will remember the sudden glimmer of understanding
As a bright orange ring fits snugly over a post
Screeches of joy at finding footing
An excitement for life I had almost forgotten
Smeared sweet potatoes
Caked firmly onto hardwood planks
Never truly clean again

I remember a time before you
Before I knew
Life could be shared



Pieces of Wood

It was a few years ago
that my husband decided to be a wooden boat builder.

He likes to build things.

He likes the water.

He is a problem solver.

We live on an isthmus.

The fir and mahogany seemed more receptive to mathematical angles and his patient persistence than the middle school math students.

Wooden boats are light and fast and beautiful.

Wood insulates against the elements.

Wood is pliable and absorbs shocks and impact well.

I cannot say that a boat
in your dining room
makes family dinnertime less tumultuous.
Or that when “the boat guy” says it is safe to epoxy in the living room
that he has evidence on the long term impact of polymer resins
on the developing brains of three young boys.
Or that having random tree “crotches” in the back of the car from neighborhood fallen trees
and gallons of Tung Oil
makes our family a favorite for the soccer carpool.

My husband's first boat built as a boat builder was regal in appearance aptly named "AliceMarie" for his Scandinavian grandmother.

It was,

in fact,

not particularly light or fast or beautiful.

There were no insulating elements.

The wood had not yet lived an experience of collisions or the impact of pounding waves.

It was untested

before its first excursion across the country on a makeshift trailer

and into the icy waters of Puget Sound.

I asked him once,

how does he know that the boat won't leak?

What if one starts an adventure across these rough frigid seas

only to find water seeping in at your feet.

The panic and uncertainty

that one will finish this race safely as the water closes in.

Do you just have faith that what you have built is worthy?

A thorough investigation might identify stress cracks or gaps in joints.

But more often than not

collisions underwater with obstacles unseen,

beaching without warning,

pounding waves that breach the bow

cause flaws that cannot be detected on visual inspection.

So a water test must be done. The boat has to go in the water.

Waves need to be simulated. Buckets overflowed.

And you wait.

You may not immediately see a leak.

Or you may see a leak that is not the culprit.

When repaired, another leak surfaces that continues slow dripping, leaking, fighting against buoyancy.

A leaky boat unfixed can quickly become a sinking ship.

But my husband's boat did not leak. And did not sink.

He did not win the race but my husband and his boat survived their maiden voyage.

His next wooden boat was indeed light and fast and beautiful.

And did not receive its epoxy in the living room.

I really don't know when his ship began to leak.

I feel bad that it had been years since I last saw him and his family.

Being in the same field in the same space does not ensure that you are close confidants.

I am not really sure

where his "fine" was on the "how are you?" scale.

Is that something you can ask?

Like, on a 1-5 Likert scale, how "fine" are you today?

These days

thinking you will be fine is asking for luck.

But if someone had asked,

might this tragedy have been prevented?

Might there somehow

somewhere

have been the right words to voice the complexity of what was wrong?

Might there have been words to make order out of his brokenness?

Might there have been a way to notice that slow leak that threatened to sink his ship?

I used to think I could always find the voice for what is wrong for others by listening and loving, making sense of what is intangible, unquantifiable, could not be given a diagnosis.

I am having a difficult time finding those words now.

They are like the random pieces of wood I find in the dining room, library and sometimes the kitchen counter or my bedroom dresser. I never know if they will become something beautiful, are splinters of finished products or are remnants of a failed undertaking.

I wait for my husband to decide where these pieces of wood will find their way.

It seems like we continue waiting.

Preparing again to let go.

Preparing again for something.

Waiting again for a purpose larger than ourselves.

Grocery Store

When there's no self-checkout station,
I choose one of the busier lines
to give me time to sort
items cold to hot
heavy to light
on the metal-stitched conveyor belt.

The cashier is—blessedly—terse,
but I cannot keep my heart out of my throat
or my eyes from veering right.
Will the sacker follow the system?
Or will the bunch of speckless green bananas
end up with the canned tomatoes
like last time?

One of these days,
I will clatter in and out with my cart,
sunglasses poised atop my head,
gum smacking with the sound of middle finger
and thumb snapping in the face of fate, and state:
It's all going to the same place.
Just throw the milk in with the bread.

One day a trip to the grocery store will be
a trip to the grocery store.
Nothing more.

Memory

It was late
when I stepped out to take a call
I stopped
to watch with arrested breath
a stag gleam silver
tinted blue beneath pearl moon
gallop down suburban street

Unlikely that his hooves held
silent on the pavement

that his flanks radiated an exquisite
mythical haze
while stars and streetlamps preened
Byzantine haloes
and time tightened the reins to take
a slow pan of the scene

But that is how I remember it

Still on the line
I sighed
but when asked
didn't answer why



VIGIL

lyrics & reflections on queer and trans grief, joy, and care

—

INTRODUCTION:

I write to you from my back porch on a Friday in September, a light breeze tossing the treetops in the yard, leaves at eye level from my second story perch. It's the last hour of the afternoon, on the day this submission is due, and I have been putting this off. Partially because of the heaviness of the subject of my essay, and partially because of the vulnerability of sharing a part of myself that feels distinct from the university context. And yet I'm drawn to submit today because these lyrics and the following essay capture the core of what draws me to my work in the Office of Community Health at DFMCH, which are the inequities in mental and behavioral health that are deeply rooted in social and structural determinants of health. I'm sharing this essay below essentially as submitted to a previous zine, with few edits, so it's not intended to address the healthcare system or healthcare teams, but to be shared in the context of community care and queer kinship.

My band released a live version of our song Vigil on August 27, 2022, and you can find it at this [link](#) and on all other platforms. At a show we played on its release date, I was emotional, thinking about how we are seeking to build a world together in which this song doesn't have to exist. At the same time, the crowd was so engaged and supportive, and we felt uplifted to be able to be in community, spreading a message we care about deeply. That duality is what the song is truly about: holding space for queer and trans grief, joy, and resilience all at once. Without further ado, here is my submission of the song's lyrics and an essay from February 2022.

—

Contains: discussion of suicide, murder, anti-trans violence

LYRICS:

Light
Shine it so all can see

Fate
Falling so faithlessly
Tonight
We cradle our memories
The weight
I'm carrying carries me

I held a vigil in my mind that night
How many candles will it take this time
Until my people stop dying
Until my people stop dying

Light
Shine it so all can see
Fate
Falling so faithlessly
Tonight
We cradle our memories
The weight
I'm carrying carries me home

I danced for ages in my mind last night
Cuz sometimes I feel strong in the weakness
But it's always on my mind
It is always on my mind
It is always on my mind

Doesn't mean we'll quit our fighting now, and it
Doesn't mean that nothing's right
Doesn't mean I don't feel strong in the weakness
But it's always on my mind

I held a vigil in my mind that night
How many candles will it take until my people stop dying
Let's dance for ages in our minds tonight
Sometimes I feel strong in the weakness
But it's always on my mind
It is always on my mind
It is always on my mind
It is always on my mind

It is always on my mind
It is always on my mind
It is always on my mind

[Submitted to a Trans Care zine in February 2022]

A TIMELINE: why and how I wrote this song, and what it means to me

This song emerged from experiences of trans care, through the spaces between trans grief and joy, specifically my experiences of community that tether the two. I want to tell you about how the song began, how it evolves, and how community care has shown up at all points along the way.

Vigil is a song I wrote in 2018 in community with Doug Rowe and LB Roussos, in a temporary band we called “Chuffed,” compiled randomly by Communication Madison for a Random Band Generator showcase. It was the first song I wrote on guitar, maybe even the first song I ever played on guitar. Doug had shown me 3 punk chords, and from those chords (and lots of encouragement) came this unexpectedly angsty song about queer and trans grief, joy, and resilience. Our randomly compiled group happened to be all non-binary/trans folks, and it was in that space and context that the song surfaced. Since then, Vigil has evolved with the care and contributions of my band, Austin Lynch, Esther Chun, and Will Ault, and collaborators Walker Scott, Jenna Joanis, Siobhan Jackson, Riley Rentfro, and Charlie Kozcela, who have played it with us. It moves and grows every time we play it live, with the love of our friends and those who connect with it.

2 years prior to writing this song, an acquaintance and classmate of mine had ended her life. I never knew her well personally, but the loss deeply impacted my community.

I have always struggled with language around suicide, and even that term itself, especially in relation to queer and trans folks. Because the disproportionate amount of trans people who consider, attempt, and go through with leaving this world cannot be separated from what it's like to exist as a trans person in this world that is often so cruel toward people outside of the gender norm. It's not a coincidence that most of the people I know who have ended their own lives were trans. It's not a coincidence either that trans people are over 4 times more likely than cis people to be victims of physical violence, and that the likelihood of experiencing violence is even higher for trans women of color in particular. Limitations on resource access and discrimination in all areas (housing, employment, healthcare) are intimately tied to quality of life and mental health.

It is colonialism, it is racism, it is homophobia, it is patriarchy, it is ableism, it is transphobia. It is written into law, enacted in culture.

This heaviness is so great, so broad, so deep. It's not something anyone can carry alone.

So we come together. This song is about that vigil for my classmate many years ago and every vigil since. It's about Trans Day of Remembrance. It's about the lonely nights when we try to remember we are not alone. It was in the context of trans community & communal art-making that these emotions had space to finally come to the surface for me. Vigil is an elegy and a love poem.

I have not experienced a desire to leave this world. I have not experienced an attack on my physical safety because of my gender identity. I move through the world with relative ease because of my whiteness, class privilege, non-disabledness, and specific gender presentation. I feel it's important to acknowledge these truths as I speak from my own experience, because my goal in writing about queer & trans grief and joy is to stand in solidarity with queer & trans community, including particularly those who are most marginalized. What I want, from my whole heart, is for my friends and community to be held and cared for and celebrated, & to be able to be deeply and utterly alive. To not only survive, but to thrive.

6 months prior to writing this song, I had attended a workshop taught by Davey Shlasko that was a deep dive into understanding trans experience and cultivating solidarity at an organizational level. Davey and others in the workshop mentioned the importance of not only talking about statistics that name how hard it is to be trans in this world, but also listening to trans narratives and talking about trans resilience.

I realized at that point that I didn't want to write or sing or talk about trans struggle and grief without honoring trans joy and resilience too. Trans care is innovation, is mischief, is collaboration, is thoughtful conversation; is an act of service with no debt implied, is radical honesty to keep each other safe, is a big warm consensual hug, is resource-sharing, is carving out space to take up; is affirmation, is a sense of humor, is a genuine apology, is a quiet night in, is the best dance party ever. Trans care is being there for ourselves and each other because we like being together in community. Trans care is being there for ourselves and each other because the systems that weren't built for us have unsurprisingly failed us. Trans care is being there for ourselves and each other to demand more/different/better from those systems anyway and understand our roles within them. Trans care is being there for ourselves and each other because it's the only way to build the world we want to live in and leave behind, piece by piece.

6 months after writing this song, I realized I want it to be both an expression of care and a call to action. I want people who feel less personally connected to these issues to

hear this and pause to feel alongside us. And maybe someday, whether or not it's tomorrow, someone will take the time to learn a friend's pronouns and speak up when they are misgendered. And maybe someday, whether or not it's tomorrow, someone will start to get involved in organizing against transphobic legislation. And maybe someday, whether or not it's tomorrow, someone will feel empowered to come out as who they are. The urgency of building a world where we are all safe to thrive as our full selves cannot be understated. And yet the little actions of changing hearts and minds cannot be underestimated. Every day I struggle and strive to remember this. Whether or not this is the right way--and knowing it's certainly not the only way--this is one offering of care. Wherever you're at, whether or not you're out, whether or not you have people in your life who affirm you--you matter, and you belong here.