



THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA  
ROY J. AND LUCILLE A. CARVER  
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

# Creative Writing Anthology

FALL 2021



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## FOREWORD

For centuries, physicians have married the science of medicine with the arts and humanities. For example, the Swiss physician, alchemist, and philosopher Paracelsus (1493-1541) wrote:

*Medicine is not only a science; it is also an art. It does not consist of compounding pills or plasters; it deals with the very processes of life, which must be understood before they may be guided.*

Paracelsus' quote suggests that understanding the "the very processes of life" entails more than the acquisition of scientific knowledge or clinical skill. It also requires an appreciation of what it means to be human.

If medicine is what helps or heals, the same may be said for the communicative arts. The most trusted medical practitioners are often effective at listening and relating to their patients and colleagues. And those exposed to the full breadth of the human condition are often uniquely positioned to reflect upon and write about it.

As part of the University of Iowa, internationally recognized as the "Writing University," the Carver College of Medicine offers physicians and learners unique opportunities to express their creativity in relation to—and outside of—medical education and practice.

This anthology is comprised of poems and short fiction written by a diverse group of Carver College of Medicine students, faculty, resident and fellow physicians, and postdoctoral researchers and scholars. These works were selected through a double-blind, peer-review process by faculty and staff at the college.

These pieces cover a wide range of topics, and each poem and story reflects its author's unique perspective and imagination. I hope you will find this collection engaging and enlightening.

**BROOKS JACKSON, MD, MBA**  
VICE PRESIDENT FOR MEDICAL AFFAIRS  
TYRONE D. ARTZ DEAN, CARVER COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

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LET'S NOT FORGET

**i.**

let's not forget  
that beneath our control  
we are flesh  
we are blood  
we are heart  
we are soul.

shared eyes  
shared mouth  
and the sweat on our backs

shared cries  
shared laughs  
stories left to unpack

we talk  
then we walk  
then we learn how to swim  
at what point did we learn to fear the color of our skin?

**ii.**

surgeons, scholars  
teachers, doctors  
a mission to provide

yearning to learn  
for the sake of learning  
yearning to learn  
from all

for beneath what they see  
we have love  
we have hope  
we are one and the same

within reason  
we spoke.

**iii.**

from the dust  
we emerged  
and relied on our grace  
for each flower that bloomed  
was a fruit gone to waste.

fruit or flower  
our roots intertwined  
yet despite the same seed,  
surface  
runs deeper than time

SRIJA MANCHKANTI  
FIRST-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT



## ELEMENTS OF LIFE

Oxygen

Oh, I can't help but to breathe  
you in. When we are apart  
I get dizzy, lightheaded.  
Your presence makes me expand,  
you leave me full.  
The rush of you to my brain  
leaves my thoughts whirring  
a plane that I cannot land.

Phosphorus

Paragon of perfection, you're built  
in a design I cannot  
begin to understand. You  
build and build, holding  
everything inside until  
you explode. Why do  
you work so hard to  
raise yourself up, only  
to tear yourself down again  
and again?

Hydrogen

How easily you spit fire,  
your love slides down my throat, burning the whole way down  
like acid.  
You are everywhere, inescapable no matter how  
fast I run.  
You are positively electric, giving parts of yourself  
to whoever asks you first.  
How can you be so small yet create, and destroy so much?

**MALLORY KALLISH**

FIRST-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT

## HOMELESS FOR SIX MONTHS

It has been six months  
since I have heard you say that word.  
You, an ambler  
jaywalker  
passerby

See how many words  
can describe  
how society grants you permission to be  
a person, just like me.

How long has it been  
since you have heard that word?

That word that acknowledges you  
as a person, just like me,  
is rarely asked of a person just like you:  
Me -  
who just happens to be living on the street.

I hesitate when you ask me to speak it:  
What is my name?  
Not because I've forgotten it  
A recognition  
of worth  
of dignity

Who could forget a name?  
But after six months  
I have begun to believe  
as do the others – the amblers  
jaywalkers  
passersby  
people who don't see they are just like me -

That it is irrelevant.

**EMMA HARTNESS**  
FIRST-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT

**GRAY HAIR MICROMEMOIR**

“Gray hair is a privilege,” promised the child with a terminal illness.

**DAVID DICKENS, MD**  
CLINICAL PROFESSOR, PEDIATRICS

### THE RHYME OF THE UNREPENTANT MORON

Four brave Covidiot, standing in a crowd.  
Trumpeting of freedom lost, my my they stand so proud!  
“It is our right!”  
they all agree, “do you and I’ll do me!”  
One breathed a bit too deeply, coughed up blood and now there’s three.

Three brave Covidiot, you know they’re here to stay.  
“Why listen to the experts, for we know as well as they!”  
“Why be afraid?”  
They all agree, “the CDC dun lied.”  
One ate aquarium cleaner, keeled over’n fucking died.

Two brave Covidiot, standing tall and true.  
“They say it’s not a one bit worse than your average flu.”  
“You know you’re right!”  
They both agree, “our freedom is no joke.”  
One freely injected Lysol then, and truly, freely, croaked.

One brave Covidiot, bravely freedom brave.  
“Brave Trump freedom brave brave free, ‘Murka freedom brave.”  
His friends were proud and true,  
But not a one survived this trauma.  
So he gave a sigh, turned homeward muttering, “Well thanks, Obama.”

**STANLEY KRUGER, PhD**  
RESIDENT, RADIATION ONCOLOGY

## THE PRACTICE

Exam Room A,  
    Close the door-  
        Close the chart.  
Guidelines  
    And metrics  
        Are set to the side.  
I listen to your story.  
    I ponder  
        Its meaning.  
Strange words  
    And rituals  
        Fill between the lines.  
I offer a prayer  
    And minister  
        With oils.  
And in this sanctuary,  
    And for this moment,  
        The practice is my own.

**DAMIAN KRYSAN, MD, PhD**  
PROFESSOR, PEDIATRICS

### **GOD'S WILL**

I am lost for words -  
The Pacific Ocean wedges  
Between my grandmother and me  
On the telephone

Her love keeps count,  
Not the 10 years since I last visited,  
But the twenty-three of us  
Grandchildren, like jeweled fruits  
Resting upon her vine

On the abacus  
Her arthritic fingers roll  
The beads of our ancestral  
Roots anchored over centuries

"Kaang Yu" she says my name slowly  
A long pause suspends like dewfall -  
Her voice quivers lightly  
A bubbling thought too afraid to surface

But it bursts, exposing  
My vine that remains bare  
Without young shoots like the others  
"Ma Ma, have you been wondering why?"

She breathes in deeply, nodding  
"Maybe it's God's will..." tears escape me  
"Oh.. God's will..." her voice echoes,  
Rippling across the ocean currents

Crashing upon my rocky shores  
She caresses my imperfections  
Washing away the painful raggedness  
To make way for God's will.

**KATHY LEE-SON, MD**  
CLINICAL ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, PEDIATRICS

### INVISIBLE STRENGTH

I am a part of thy body, but  
Thou hast never seen me,  
I am a part of thy mind, but  
Thou canst never find me.

Anatomic dissections, physiologic experiments  
Political inquisitions and torture  
Have all come and gone.  
Yet, I remain obscure . . . and oblivious.  
But I am the reason you hope and live,  
I am thy soul, thine own soul.

When you were lost, I found you  
When you are happy my spirits rise with yours.  
My tears have whet the appetite of your sorrows,  
My sublime light feeds the pastures of your imagination,  
And I pamper you with the passion to love everything and relish life.  
I am your soul.

ISAAC SAMUEL, MD  
PROFESSOR, SURGERY

### OPERATING ROOM #13

The message on the pager said simply, “ER stat 55 yo male knife in belly low BP.”

It was almost 3 am on the night of the winter solstice. Dr. June Slattery splashed some cold water on her face in the small on-call room sink and turned on the ball of her right foot to head to the ER at a loping half run.

She rapidly elbowed her way through the crowded trauma room to join her resident at the head of the bed. She was relieved to see that it was Anna, an extremely competent mid-level who wanted to go into Transplant Surgery when she finished training.

“He’s gotten four liters of Ringers and we just started hanging the O-neg. I think his belly’s been getting bigger while we resuscitate him,” Anna said. Slattery nodded. From the head of the gurney, she looked straight down at the naked body of a middle-aged man with a large knife buried up to the hilt in his belly. A wide-eyed medical student held pressure around the knife with two bloody pads. Dark blood formed lazy but persistent rivulets that coalesced into puddles on the drapes. Someone had put blankets on the floor in a futile attempt to soak it up.

“Let me see,” Slattery said to the med student. The student gingerly lifted the pads and the flow of blood immediately increased. It reminded Slattery of the largest blade in the set she’d been given as a wedding present. A hefty 5 or 6 inch long black plastic handle and about ½ inch of micro-serrated edge were visible. A wicked sharp butcher knife.

The knife entered the abdomen just to the left of the man’s umbilicus and now a brisk new ribbon of dark blood ran from the entrance site, spilling over onto the floor. She glanced at the x-rays: chest and abdomen. Trajectory angled slightly down.

“Okay, resume pressure. You know that the knife can’t move, not even a millimeter? And don’t cut yourself. You know how important this is?”

“Yes ma’am. If the knife moves, it could do further damage. We only remove it in the operating room.” Slattery nodded. She mentally ticked off a long list of things that could bleed that much.

“We got his BP up to 100 just now. The OR’s expecting us,” Anna said. “They put us in room 13.”

“Anna. You hold the knife for the student and have her climb up on the gurney. You – what’s your name? Dierdre? You will ride the gurney to hold the knife absolutely stable, understand? Pack and go. Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go! Room 13? I thought that was just a storeroom.”

“That’s where they told me to take him.”

“Okay. Pack and go! You know what to do. Don’t let anyone touch that knife. Pull the sheet up ’til you get there. Prep around it, prep the knife, keep it in the field.”

Anna nodded, “He’s ready.”

Slattery stretched, stopped in the lavatory, drank a few swallows of stale coffee, and followed.

Inside OR 13, the anesthesiologist was checking lines and tubes. Anna guarded the knife while the medical student prepped the abdomen.



“Prep the knife too. It goes into the sterile field. Don’t let it move,” Slattery said. Anna nodded without looking up. BP was 100.

Slattery went out to the sink and began to scrub. Lather up, brush all four surfaces (front, back, and two sides) of each finger, then the hand, the wrist, the forearm.

The water was cold that evening, glacially cold. That always made things worse. She closed her eyes and willed warmth into her right hand, lest it cramp up.

She took extra care with her good hand, as she now tried to think of it. Good was a relative term. Ten years ago, an accident so hopelessly mangled her right ring finger that it had to be amputated. Her surgeon had adeptly moved the two adjacent fingers closer together, and time had closed the gap. Few people noticed the narrower, trident-shaped hand that had resulted.

The price of saving her hand was hypersensitivity, and an inability to handle many of the instruments of her craft. She had reinvented her surgical career by giving up the difficult trauma cases she had once loved in favor of burn surgery and critical care, which used different sets of instruments, tools that she could handle. But sometimes, like tonight, the trauma team was away at a conference, and she covered for them. And she practiced, teaching the residents in the formal trauma course – operating on live anesthetized pigs with real injuries – all this to convince herself she could still do it.

Deep in the crevice there was a wad of scar tissue so tender to touch that the wrong twist of a surgical instrument, designed for a large four-fingered male hand, could send the whole hand into a spasm. She’d developed coping strategies, of course, keeping her middle finger and its new neighbor, her little finger, clamped tightly together unless extra mobility was needed. When all else failed, she would slip her third finger into the ring of a surgical clamp or a needle holder, so that it took the place of the lost ring finger. But that was difficult and always painful. She let the rings of the instruments ride high, on the terminal phalanges of her fingers, so that descent into the perilous crevice was virtually impossible. And if, as sometimes happened, something got down into that never-land, she took deep breaths and waited for the room to stop tilting crazily from side to side.

Now, at the scrub sink, it required a small effort of will for her to spread those two guardian fingers enough to scrub down into the crevice of this neo-web space, even the very depths. Finally, it was done, and done fast, and every surface of each finger and every web space, even her neo-web, was as clean as she could render it.

A blanket of broken glass settled warmly over her remaining fingers. She fought the beast back into its lair and scrubbed the back of her right hand, then up the wrist to the forearm. Hands held high, she backed into the operating room.

The team staffing OR 13 was unfamiliar. The scrub tech, a tall slender man with kind eyes, gowned her and then held out the right glove, waiting for her to thrust her hand into it. She slipped her right hand into the glove, leaving the fourth finger of the glove empty. Then the left hand. Trying to be inconspicuous, she deftly pushed on the

empty right fourth finger of the glove to invert it, and then tucked it smoothly under the rest of the glove. When it was fixed to her satisfaction, she looked up to see the scrub tech smiling at her.

“You don’t need to do that,” he said.

“It gets in the way,” she said.

“You don’t need that here.”

“I don’t think we’ve worked together before. I’m Dr June Slattery. I’m the senior trauma surgeon on call tonight.”

He smiled again, the skin around his eyes crinkling easily into crows-feet. “I’m just a traveler,” he said, and turned back to his instrument table. A traveler. A nurse working for a staffing company on short assignments.

“What should I call you?”

He turned away from her and busied himself with his back table of instruments. Slattery was reassured to see that he had prepared a wide range, including vascular clamps and long needle holders. She turned her attention back to the belly, now prepped and draped, and then to the anesthesiologist.

“Are you ready? He’s probably going to drop his pressure when we get in. How much blood do you have?” She noted with approval that blood was being pumped into two iv’s, one in each arm.

“Six units in the room, not counting what’s hanging, and six units more in the Blood Bank. BP’s holding at 100.”

While Dierdre held pressure around the knife and kept it steady, Anna and Slattery made a long trauma laparotomy incision – from the breastbone to the pubis – entering the abdomen fast and scooping out blood and clots into a basin. They followed the knife deep into the abdomen, marking and rapidly closing all the injuries they found with surgical staples.

When they finally removed the knife, dark blood welled up from the bottom of the hole. Fast. The Big One, the bleeder to end all bleeders, still lurked in the very bottom of the operative field. All that remained, finally, was to expose the inferior vena cava, conduit for all the blood from the lower half of the body, big as your thumb and thin walled as a rose petal. Expose it and fix it.

“How’s his pressure?”

“110/70. Best it’s ever been. He’s gotten eight units of packed cells and we’re starting the platelets and clotting factors. I have six more units of blood here in the OR refrigerator, and the blood bank is ready to get us more.”

“Good. I’m going to remove the packs now. He’s going to bleed again until we can get definitive control and repair whatever it is. Anna, you know the drill. Two sponge sticks, now!”

There, finally exposed, was the inferior vena cava – the vein which brought all the blood from the lower half of the body back to the heart. It was bleeding so fast they couldn’t see the shape or size of the hole.

“Good. Now, expose the injury. Dierdre, work the suction, keep the field clear. Anesthesia – it’s the IVC. He’s gonna bleed more before we can finally stop it for good.”

Anna carefully dissected the anterior surface of the inferior vena cava. There was a clean slice right through it, parallel with the walls and about an inch long. An injury like that could bleed fast enough to exsanguinate the man in a matter of minutes.

“Okay. Anna. Next, the two vascular clamps, just like we practiced in the trauma course, in the lab, you know?”

The traveler was already holding out a Satinsky clamp, she noted with approval. It was a medium sized vascular clamp with C-shaped jaws, designed to partially occlude flow through a vessel and allow the surgeon to suture vessel in a dry field while some blood still got through to the rest of the body. Anna put it on.

“Now the big one.”

Anna nested the big Satinsky outside the smaller one. It should work. It was supposed to work. But when Slattery let up on the sponge sticks, blood flooded the field again.

“Okay. Take them off and try again.”

Anna tried again but couldn’t get the clamps positioned right. There was a knack to it, a knack that came with the confidence of long experience.

“Okay. You take the sponge sticks. I’ll put the Satinskys on for you. Then you can suture the IVC, okay?” Anna took the sponge sticks and Slattery held her hand out for the smaller Satinsky. The Satinskys had rings on their handles so that, if one wished, one could put the thumb and fourth finger in for greater control. Just as everyone does with a pair of scissors.

Not for the first time, Slattery rued her missing fourth finger. But she was able to manipulate and place the two clamps. When Anna released the sponge sticks, the Satinskys held. Slattery released the inner one so that the full extent of the injury could be seen. Fortunately, the knife had not injured the back wall of the cava, and the ureter, running nearby, was intact.

“Now, take the 4-0 Prolene vascular and run a suture line from one end to the other. Small but adequate bites, just like we’ve done in the lab.” Anna took the big needle holder, slipped her fingers easily into the rings (Slattery couldn’t help noticing, with a bit of jealousy) and slowly pushed the needle through the two sides of the injury.

“Gently! Follow the curve of the needle! Don’t tear the wall of vessel! If you aren’t careful, you can make things worse instead of better.” Anna slowed down even more. This would take far too long.

“Anna, I’m going to have to do this. Sorry.” Slattery steeled herself and held out her right hand for the needle holder. The traveler laid it gently into the palm. She automatically slid her fourth finger and thumb into the rings in the old way, the way she had always done it before the injury, without pain, without hesitation, without awkwardness. She placed the sutures briskly but methodically, and when they released the Satinsky clamp

and allowed blood to flow through the repair, there was only one tiny defect in the suture line that needed a small stitch. When that stitch had been placed, and Anna tied it down, there was no further bleeding.

Slattery straightened up and handed the needle holder back to the traveler. She saw all four fingers of her right hand intact, just as before the injury. But there was no time, her fingers blurred, and she returned her concentration to the belly in front of them. They irrigated the abdomen with liters of warm saline, checked and rechecked all the injuries, and put on a temporary closure. His BP was good. She peeled off her gloves and stared at her right hand. Four fingers blurred and became three. Her hand was trident-shaped, and suddenly the crevasse ached.

The team packed the patient up and rolled him out the door to the recovery room, Slattery following them. Suddenly she realized that she had not thanked the traveler and turned back. She stopped outside OR 13 and glanced briefly into the brightly lit room. She saw a flash of motion – probably the traveler cleaning up. She opened the door and walked in.

OR 13 was dark. It was full of boxes and cartons of supplies. It was a storeroom. Nothing more.

The traveler was gone. The entire OR setup was gone. She stood in the hallway and looked around. All the ORs on this end of the suite were dark. At the far end of the corridor, she saw her team just entering the recovery room with the patient. She stripped off her bloody shoe covers and ran after them.

In the brightly lit recovery room, her team was clustered around their patient. “His BP is 120/80 and he’s starting to make urine,” Anna said.

Slattery flexed her fingers. They hurt. She looked at her right hand again. A familiar pain radiated from the crevasse.

“We were just in OR 13,” she said softly.

“There is no OR 13,” Anna said without looking away from the monitors, “Dierdre, hook these tubes up to suction. Make sure they send off labs – CBC, chem 7, PT, PTT, make sure they check his platelets – and it all goes stat... how much urine is he making?”

**CAROL SCOTT-CONNER, MD, PhD, MBA**  
PROFESSOR EMERITUS, SURGERY

## SMOKING MOUNTAINS

Driving home yesterday  
 I remembered how you  
 Use to look at the mountains  
 Seeing the little puffs of clouds  
 Around them saying, look  
 The Mountains are smoking.  
 Then you would fuss at them  
 Don't you know smoking is bad!  
 You get cancer and then die!  
 I was amused on those days.  
 But then that day arrived  
 At the doctor's office  
 When we found out that you had cancer,  
 But you were so young my child.  
 The chemo, the radiation, the surgeries,  
 The pain and agony of watching you  
 Slowly succumb to the disease.  
 The heart break and hurt,  
 The long difficult years,  
 Until you finally passed.  
 So now when I see the wisp of clouds  
 Around the mountains as I drive home,  
 I think of you and the times we had  
 While you were still with us.

**ANONYMOUS**  
 NEUROSCIENCE AND PHARMACOLOGY

### IN TUNE WITH LIFE

The wind through the trees.  
The sound of the birds in  
The dawn and dusk.  
The croak of the frog,  
The bark of a dog.  
The meow of a cat, and  
The rain striking the roof.  
Ocean waves running up the beach  
Power and harmony displayed to all.  
Nature's melodies, harmonies, and cords.  
Mathematical in structure and form  
With beauty of vibrations and  
Resonances of majesty.  
The orchestra of the cosmos in display.  
Sounds, vibrations, and the music  
That traverse through nature and the universe.  
Oh, to be in tune with the cosmos  
A resonance that transcends life.  
Math and Physics attempts to  
Describe and explain nature, but  
Music brings all three into concert  
With tones, melodies, and harmonies.  
To be in music is the expression  
Of intellect, genius, and the universe.

**ANONYMOUS**  
NEUROSCIENCE AND PHARMACOLOGY

## **LAMENT OF THE ON-CALL RESIDENT**

Beginning call shift,  
Managed to flush the pager.  
So...no admits, right?

**AISHA DAVID, MD**  
CLINICAL ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, FAMILY MEDICINE

## HEBE

Hebe tread the grassy path  
With silent dainty feet  
To fetch a cup of nectar  
And quench the summer heat

She dipped her silver ladle  
In the bubbling magic spring  
She sipped the cool fresh liquid  
And the endless life it brings

She blew a kiss against the sky  
And caused the leaves to flutter  
Her lovely face and kindly gaze  
Had nature all a stutter

Her eternal youth and flawless form  
Were wondrous to behold  
A gentle forgiving goddess  
Never to grow old

Of all the gods who roam the earth  
With power, speed in chase  
None can match this placid goddess  
Her serene visage, her timeless grace.

**BROOKS JACKSON, MD, MBA**  
PROFESSOR, PATHOLOGY



## THE WRAITH OF CORN

Long ago among fields of corn  
 A maiden lived named Mirabelle  
 Who'd walk the fields each early morn  
 With golden hair marvellous

A maiden's eyes of sapphire blue  
 And honey colored hair  
 That draped a face of pleasant hue  
 With skin so soft and fair

A slender wraith enshrined in mist  
 Moist in summer's morning dew  
 The tufts of corn she gently kissed  
 A fertile growth did she imbue

One day a savage storm arose  
 And lightning flashed severe  
 Thunder boomed and windblast blows  
 Engendered stunning fear

So strong the bolt that struck her down  
 She vanished in thin air  
 No remains of her could be found  
 But golden silks of hair

Mirabelle is long since gone  
 But leaves a golden tassel  
 More silky than chiffon  
 Glossy soft and gracile

**BROOKS JACKSON, MD, MBA**  
 PROFESSOR, PATHOLOGY

### **RAGING RIVER**

A fearful rain  
As lost as a child  
A bridge in the night  
Asking directions  
Another lie  
Another false summit  
Aching for the high ground  
But like the raging river  
Racism never recedes.

**DAMIAN KRYSAN, MD, PhD**  
PROFESSOR, PEDIATRICS

## THE GRAND EXPERIMENT

Sneaking through the corridor,  
away from alarms, humanity, and patients,  
toward calm, experiments, and cells.  
Transfection complete.  
Pager beeps.  
Run toward the chaos,  
I missed it already.  
But what will my experiment yield?  
A physician-scientist, I hypothesize.

**TYLER RASMUSSEN, MD, PhD**  
FELLOW, INTERNAL MEDICINE

## THE SPRING OF 2020

Did we really need a germ  
to bring us all as one?  
If this is the price of unity  
then will more poison come?  
If this is the price of unity  
are we headed for Kingdom Come?  
Did we really need the germ  
to bring us all as one?

How can we fight  
an unseen enemy,  
When the real adversary  
is our own disunity?

Did he need to ask to breathe  
to bring us all as one?  
Did he really have to die  
to bring us all as one?  
Will it always be our task  
to ask to need to breathe?  
Will it always be our creed  
to need to ask to breathe?

How can we fight  
an unseen enemy,  
If the unseen enemy  
is inside you and me?

ISAAC SAMUEL, MD  
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## RIPENING TOMATOES

Your tomatoes ripened in the basement of the 120-year-old farmhouse. Wrapped in paper bags and plastic bins, they matured in the dark. You harvested them when they were green, the week the night-time temperatures dropped below 40 degrees. The master gardeners said they would ripen indoors, but we had never tried before. You sliced one for a ham sandwich, and it released the humid, promising scent of summer. The flesh was firm and brilliant dripping seeds onto the plate and your fingers.

Overcast spring skies had saturated the soil. Water carried early sprouts into the storm sewer behind the house. You rescued some seedlings from a local garden center. Suffering from a late frost, their leaves were misshapen, molding on the ends.

One Friday, you rocked on the porch after work. Voices of sick patients and medical trainees echoed in your head. Our children chattered with each other inside the front door. My cellphone flashed with storm alerts, but I ignored them. It had rained again, but the wind died down and the sky smoked an incandescent orange and grey. We were safe, right? Then your father called from Brazil. "Did you check the farm? The neighbors said a tornado touched down."

Branches and hot wires blocked the country driveway. Fallen trees dragged electrical lines off the house. The garage collapsed into a pile of cinder blocks. Rubble entrapped a 1950s blue pick-up truck. Fire fighters and family friends arrived to help while the country road choked with storm chasers.

So, in the weeks when we would normally plant the garden, the land was occupied with chainsaws and heavy equipment and burning trash.

There is a story about a woman with an alabaster jar of perfume. She massages a man reclining at table with expensive oil. Bystanders criticize, "why all this waste?" They miss the beauty in her pungent, unexpected act. Perhaps they question her motives. Maybe they envy his position. Do they lack food at the table—no olive oil, salt or tomatoes. No time to rest and be filled?

You planted the stunted seedlings in the long sun of July. The roots took hold supporting the branches. The leaves broadened. The flowers bloomed and the fruit swelled. But in October, when the nights turned cold, green produce remained on the vine — Romas and

Brandywine, Amish Paste and Beefsteak. Heads and stalks of maturing weeds stuck to your clothing as you gathered tomatoes in the basement.

Unexpectedly, there were other visitors in the farmhouse who wanted to taste the freshharvest. They had long tails and beady eyes, five fingers and furry backs. They left a mess of tomato skins and scat and teeth marks. If I am lucky, outside they met bull snakes and foxes and swooping great horned owls.

So, you sorted the tomatoes. Tossing the gnawed and rotten ones in the compost, you washed the juicy, red remains. I mixed them with parmesan cheese, local greens, olive oil and salt. Our family reclined at table. The fragrance overwhelmed.

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## THE OLD GRANDFATHER AND HIS GRANDSON

It was the usual afternoon ritual. The large golden dog ascended from his mid-day nap, barked twice, and limped slowly toward the arriving school bus. The boy skipping across the lawn patted her on the head as they headed for the front porch of the old Victorian house.

"I'm home," Aaron yelled. The door slammed behind him as he dropped his book bag on the floor next to the couch.

"Do you want a snack?" Aaron's mother asked. She stood at the kitchen counter chopping vegetables for dinner.

"Not right now," he answered. "I have to see Grandpa."

"We'll probably have an early dinner," she said. "Daddy's got a board meeting at the bank tonight." Then, after a pause, she added. "I think Grandpa's in his room."

Grandpa's was the only bedroom on the main floor. Aaron could see Grandpa sitting in his big easy chair, watching his old television set through the half-opened door. As always, Grandpa wore his tattered black and gold wool knit cap, the old man's trademark. Aaron couldn't remember ever seeing him without it — "keeps me warm" he would say when anyone asked.

Grandpa had the sound turned up as high as it would go. As he looked in Aaron's direction, a broad smile crept across his leathery face, pushing wrinkles back toward his sagging ears. For a moment, one of his hearing aids began screeching and then miraculously subsided.

"You know what we learned today?" Aaron said. He didn't wait for an answer. "Whales are the oldest living mammals. They can live over one hundred years. One hundred," he said again.

Grandpa reached for the channel changer, but it slipped from his trembling hand. Aaron always marveled how suddenly the shaking would begin, like a thunderstorm coming through on a hot summer day. The old man leaned forward to retrieve it, his head shaking from side to side. Aaron picked it up and pressed the power button for him—the TV went silent and blank.

"I think Methuselah lived over 900 years," Grandpa said, his voice quavering in time with the unkempt fringe of bobbling white hair that peeked out from under his cap.

"Who was he?" Aaron asked.

"He was in the Bible. Genesis, I think," he answered.

"Are people really mammals?"

"Of course."

"Is that like the time you told me dinosaurs were made of chocolate?" Aaron asked. "That wasn't true. Even my teacher said so."

"The only dinosaurs we've ever had around this house were made of chocolate," Grandpa said, smiling at Aaron. "But you're right. The ones that lived long ago were made of flesh and bone like those whales you learned about."

“What happened to Methuselah?” Aaron asked.

“He finally died just like all living creatures do,” Grandpa answered. “The whales, the dinosaurs, they all have to die sometime.”

“Will you live for 900 years?”

“No, but I might live to be one hundred, just like your whales,” he answered. “I’m only a few years short.”

“Will Mom and Dad die someday?”

“Yes, when they get old like me, but you’ll be all grown up by then and have to help look after them.”

“Can we play some checkers?” Aaron asked. He looked at the checkerboard lying on top of Grandpa’s dresser. The red and black pieces were carefully stacked, the way Aaron left them the last time they played.

“You’ll have to get the board and the pieces from my dresser,” Grandpa said. “The way I shake, I’ll probably drop them all over.”

It seemed to Aaron that they had been playing for just a short while, but they were, in fact, on their tenth game when Mom entered the room. “You two better wash up for dinner,” she said. “Daddy’s getting dressed for tonight’s meeting.”

“I just got a king,” Aaron announced. He raised his hand in a victory salute. Mommy smiled—for Aaron it was all about getting kings.

Aaron’s dad was the dean of the law school. Aaron didn’t know what a dean was but he thought it was like being a king. He was sure that what his father did was very important.

The kitchen was the biggest room in the house. A round table that seated eight people sat in the middle. Tonight the air was filled with the cooking smells of cumin, coriander, and cardamom. Aaron liked the aroma of curry and he especially liked the peanuts and coconut that Mom served with it. The cauliflower and spinach in the sauce were okay but he hated the slimy okra pods. Sometimes Daddy would eat a few of them for him when Mom wasn’t looking.

Aaron entered the kitchen and sat down across from his Mom and Dad. Grandpa shambled in behind him, holding on to his walker. Daddy was already sitting in his chair, wearing a dark gray suit with a starched white shirt and his black and gold striped tie. He always got dressed up for meetings. Daddy looked up from his sheaf of papers and smiled as Aaron sat down. Grandpa used to sit across the table from Daddy, next to Aaron, but now he had to sit alone at a small table in the corner where Daddy couldn’t see him eating. Usually the two men got along just fine, but when food got spilled, Daddy couldn’t stand it. Everything had to be perfect for Daddy.

Aaron’s big dog sat at attention under Grandpa’s table. She used to sit under the big table but when Grandpa moved so did the dog. It was all about the food that got dropped.



One day, a few months before, Grandpa had a bad time with his shaking hands. “Just look at the mess he makes when he eats,” Daddy had shouted at Mom. The spoon had just slipped from Grandpa’s hand, bits of food splattering on the floor. Aaron got up and gave the spoon back to Grandpa who wiped it clean on his shirt. Daddy was so angry he yelled right there in front of everyone.

Aaron had looked at his Mom. She didn’t say anything, but he could see she was upset and embarrassed.

“There’s food all over the table and all over his shirt and even on the floor,” Daddy said, pointing. “I know he’s got bad shakes, but he takes all the pleasure out of eating. I wish the doctor would do something about it.”

“You know it runs in your family,” Mom said. “His neurologist says it’s a familial tremor. You’ve got a little of it too, especially when you get upset. Your father’s shaking has just gotten worse in the last few years.” Grandpa just looked down at his plate, trying to get a last piece of meat on his spoon.

“Every time I take him to the doctor, he gives Dad another medicine but none of them have done him any good. But you know that. Last week the doctor said there’s an operation that might help but Dad’s afraid of brain surgery. And, anyway, he’s a little too old.”

“Well, this just can’t go on,” Daddy had said. He didn’t seem as mad anymore, his voice was low and serious. “I just can’t put up with it. Besides, it’s a bad example for the boy.” He walked out, his dinner not quite finished.

After that day, Mom set up the little table in the corner for Grandpa and got him a eating towel. Aaron didn’t say anything, he just watched.

Now Mom brought the food in big bowls and placed them in the middle of the table. Daddy filled their three plates and passed them around. Aaron waited for the peanuts and shredded coconut. Grandpa sat at his table facing the wall so Daddy couldn’t see him. After all the food was served, Mom took a large green plastic bowl and filled it with a helping of the chicken curry, vegetables, peanuts, and coconut and put it down in front of Grandpa.

“Let me put your towel on before you get started,” she said.

“What did you learn in school today?” Daddy asked as Aaron began eating his peanuts.

“That whales live for a long time,” Aaron said. “They get to be more than a hundred. Just like Grandpa’s gonna’ be.”

Aaron looked over at the old man. He was bent over his bowl, eating slowly. All Aaron could see was the back of his plaid work shirt and the dog licking the floor.

He looked back over at his mother. “Can you take me with you the next time you go to the mall?” he asked.

“Is there something you need there?” his father asked. “A new game or something? Make sure you spend your allowance on something you really need.”

Aaron thought for a minute. “I want to buy two big green bowls,” he answered. “I don’t need them now, but I think I will later on.”

“What will you do with them?” his mother asked, with a surprised smile.

“I want to save them for when I’m all grown up so you and Daddy will have something to eat out of,” Aaron answered. His voice had a matter-of-fact tone, it seemed like a simple request to him.

For a long moment, the room was silent except for the clatter of Grandpa’s spoon hitting the edge of his bowl. The smile evaporated from Mom’s face as she looked intently at her son. Daddy turned his head away and gazed out the kitchen window before he reached across the table and squeezed Mom’s hand. Aaron watched the tears flood his mother’s cheeks. He stopped eating—he’d never seen her cry before.

Mom got out of her chair and kissed Aaron on the top of his head. He felt the warm tears fall on his forehead. She walked over to Grandpa and kissed him on the head too and caressed his shoulders.

“Daddy, why don’t you come back over to the dinner table?” She said quietly, still crying. Aaron saw his father nod his head. “We want you to eat with us. You can leave the towel and the bowl there. I’ll get you a second helping on a regular plate.”

Mom steadied Grandpa as he got up slowly. “No, no, I’ll keep the towel,” he paused for a long moment, “and the bowl too.” They’re good ideas.”

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*This story is based on “The Old Grandfather and his Grandson” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, published in Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children’s and Household Tales—Grimms’ Fairy Tales), Berlin 1857, no. 78.*

## WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THIS FOR YOUR FAMILY?

*Would you recommend this if my husband were your father?* This was a question I received on the surgical oncology floor during my intern year. This was such a common question I heard so many times that year. Usually when I answered, the patients would take my word and usually choose to do what I was suggesting. This was not the case.

My patient had been in the hospital already for nearly two weeks after surgery. He could not go home because he would become nauseated anytime his nasogastric tube was even put to gravity drainage. He had postsurgical gastroparesis and very little passed through his gastrointestinal system following the surgery. He could not get any nutrition by mouth and already had been started on total parenteral nutrition (TPN).

The simple answer to his question was yes. The patient and his wife had already heard this answer a dozen times by the attending surgeon, the chief residents, and the nurse practitioners on the team. This patient needed a gastrojejunostomy tube to drain his stomach through the gastrotomy and receive feeds through the jejunostomy. No matter how many times they explained this to the patient and his wife, they continued to refuse.

Despite me telling the patient and his wife this tube was something I would want for my family, it took three days for me to realize why they were so fervently against it. It was a twofold reason.

They did not fully understand what was happening on a physiological scale. Everyone was telling the patient we were waiting for his stomach to “wake up” after surgery, thinking this would be a couple days away since he was progressing. Unfortunately, the patient and his wife did not understand we did not know when this would happen and that it could take “weeks to months” for this to happen. In the meantime, while we were waiting, he was getting weaker and putting himself up for the risk of other problems with the TPN, nasogastric tube, and physically being in the hospital.

The other reason the patient was against this was the patient’s biggest fear. He did not want to be seen as a “sick man.” Relying on a tube for nutrition as well as palliation of his symptoms was not something he wanted at all. What no one in my service had learned was that the patient had hoped to get back to his manual labor work soon after his surgery. Telling the patient he would be relying on this tube after his hospital stay meant he was unlikely going to return to work anytime soon, something that he did not want since he was the breadwinner of his family.

Despite knowing all this information, I still had to explain to the patient and his wife that he needed this tube to get himself healthier and stronger. It was in telling him stories about other patients with these tubes and what could be done to make the tube work with his lifestyle that allowed him to understand that we were working in his best interests. We were truly trying to do the best thing for him, as though he was a member of our family. Like family though, nothing is ever simple, and knowing a patient’s motivations is the best way to help come to an understanding about what needs to be done. And ultimately, no matter how many times he asked, I would tell him this was what I would want for anyone in my family.

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## THE CIRCUS MONKEY AND HIS SECRET TRICK

There once lived a monkey in a traveling circus who performed many tricks and was so talented that he came up with new antics to entertain the audience the entire time. Due to his intelligence and creativity, he was popularly called “Monkey Einstein.”

He had one special trick that no one else knew about, except the owner of the traveling circus. The circus monkey’s secret trick was not a “trick” in the strictest sense, but rather a rare talent that nobody had for hundreds of miles around. Monkey Einstein had the instinct of sensing fire so early that he could signal the circus owner to put out any fire before it spread. He used his five basic senses which were his eyes and ears, nose and tongue, and fingers, but most importantly, he had a sixth sense that identified a fire before any animal or human could suspect that one had begun. He could see a spark, he could hear a crackle, he could smell a fume, his tongue enhanced his sense of smell, and his fingers picked up the warmth. Magically, his sixth sense was a hidden radar only he possessed. It sent signals to his brain even before his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or fingers were aware of a fire. His sixth sense alerted him where to look and to focus his natural senses on detecting the tiniest of fires.

He learned this remarkable talent from his parents who also performed as circus monkeys at a celebrated, old, small-town circus where he was born. His parents were good teachers and taught him all that they knew, and almost everything that Monkey Einstein learned had been passed on to him from his father and mother. They also taught him to respect and remember his ancestors because of the wisdom of the ages that they had collected and passed on from one generation to the next. He inherited his sprightly golden-brown fur from them and wore it with pride. Monkey Einstein’s parents wanted him to become better than them in every way when he grew up. He did not disappoint them. While they found fires with their five senses, he spotted fires with his sixth sense even before they could.

The owner of the traveling circus was as tall and slim as a street pole and worked as the clown in his circus. He was a unique clown for being mischievous and hilarious all at once and for performing tricks with a straight face never smiling at all – like a seasoned poker face. So, he earned the nickname “Poker Joker”. Monkey Einstein loved to ride on Poker Joker during the show and mimic his acts balancing precariously on his head, occasionally pretending to fall off and then miraculously clinging to Poker Joker’s ears. The two of them performed such clever gimmicks that they became the stars of the show. The more they traveled, the more famous the circus became and, in each city, thousands of people came from afar to watch their show. Whenever Monkey Einstein sensed the first inkling of a fire, he would jump off Poker Joker’s head, move his body with a peculiar dance, and make noises with his voice like a burst of lunatic hysteric laughter. The antic distracted the crowd from the emerging subtle flame. He then moved speedily to the fire, with Poker Joker anxiously prancing behind him to stomp it out with his larger-than-life gigantic fireproof shoes. It looked like a circus *trick* planned and rehearsed, and the crowd was entertained rather than frightened.

Together, Poker Joker and Monkey Einstein, along with an exotic variety of well-trained animals, performed shows all over the world. But Monkey Einstein had the extra task of putting out all the fires and saving many precious lives. In those days, the tent canvas was not fireproof and people at circuses smoked with impunity. If a fire spread and engulfed the circus tent, people would be scared to come to the show. More importantly, all the people and children watching the show, and all the circus animals big and small, could perish in a single fire within a matter of minutes.

With time, various animals in the circus grew weary because they were overworked and burned out and could not come up with new tricks. One by one, the animals stopped performing and left the circus. Poker Joker bought new animals to replace the ones that left, but Monkey Einstein and he had to patiently train them for a long time. Eventually, all the animals in the circus were new except for Monkey Einstein. However, the new animals started disliking Monkey Einstein. They envied his unique tricks and antics, his unbeatable talents, and his popularity and fame. They were particularly jealous of his close friendship with Poker Joker. The new animals conspired to steal his tricks, justifying their actions by saying that he had too many talents while they had too few. They even arrogantly joked and laughed about taking over the entire circus.

Before long, the animals grouped together and spread their dislike for him like a contagion. The negative feelings grew to eternal hate for Monkey Einstein. When Poker Joker was away, they would tease and bully the circus monkey. A donkey kicked him with his hind legs pretending it was an accident. An elephant nonchalantly stepped on his tail. A squinty-eyed black-and-white zebra taunted him for the color of his fur, calling him, “dirty yellow-brown monkey,” and a yellow-brown parrot mindlessly echoed the zebra’s bigoted statement. An orangutan silently stole his bananas while the carnivorous big cats threatened to make monkey soup. More and more animals of various species joined the group because it was easier to join a gang rather than a singled-out monkey. They even accused Monkey Einstein of enslaving them, although he was also a slave like them. Things reached a point that Monkey Einstein was too distressed to remain amidst a gang of animals that induced shame and fear in him, trying to rid him from the circus to grab everything he had.

One night, when Poker Joker was out dining with business friends, Monkey Einstein warily escaped from the circus grounds. When Poker Joker came to the tent late that night, he could not find Monkey Einstein anywhere. He looked up and down, high and low, near and far, and far and wide, but there was no sign of his famous circus monkey. Poker Joker began to panic. He felt tight knots in his belly and felt sick. His mind went numb as if frizzled by lightning. His heart tumbled down a bottomless pit. He realized that he had always taken Monkey Einstein for granted, that he had never imagined something like this would happen. He had only himself to blame. He became guilt-ridden because he had long suspected that several animals were bullying his dear monkey, yet he had done nothing about it. He wished he had paid more attention to his poor little monkey and not let him feel that lonely. After all, if Monkey Einstein never returns, Poker Joker’s circus burns, his business fails, and all is lost.

Poker Joker ran into the city to search the streets and a nearby park for his circus monkey. He went to the grove of trees where monkeys are known to prowl by night, and wise-looking owls chant their eerie hoots into the velvet darkness. The first sliver of the newest moon was too faint to shed light on the mystery of the missing monkey. Bats drooped from high trees, hanging around indifferent to Poker Joker's rising tensions. Poker Joker was more frightened than ever now that Monkey Einstein was not upon his head, looking out for fires, and seemingly protecting him from all evil. It was a treacherous loneliness in that ghastly ghostly blackness, and his precious circus monkey was gone. His feet went icy cold, and his legs began to shake like the branches of a tree in a wicked storm. Dazed and faint, he stumbled around intoxicated by fear. He staggered across the park, back towards the city, tripping and falling a few times on unforgiving thorny shrubs. He retraced his steps along the empty city streets, almost giving up his search. As he reached the ring of rope on the grounds around the circus, pale, sweating, and bleeding, he recognized a faint silhouette from the corner of his eye. The figure was perched among the outlines of the bushes. It was him!

Poker Joker approached Monkey Einstein cautiously, not wanting to frighten him. He asked gently, "Why did you run away?"

"I never really ran away," said Monkey Einstein, "I just moved from the bright tent to the shadows outside. I need to heal."

"But why were you lingering, in the shadows?" Poker Joker asked, hoping he would say he was waiting for him, to return to the circus together. Monkey Einstein, shrouded in sad silence, did not reply.

Poker Joker extended his lanky arms in an open welcoming embrace. Monkey Einstein jumped into his arms, and they hugged and wept. Hugging each other as if they would never part again, they went back into the circus tent. "From now on, I would like to share with you my countless riches from a bigger circus I will build," said Poker Joker.

"You need a bigger circus. You need the riches. None for me, I don't need it," said Monkey Einstein humbly, "I could not leave because I realized I am the only one that knows my secret special trick. I did not want the circus to catch fire. I want to protect the people and the children who come to watch our show. I want to protect all the animals in the tent — even the ones that tried to push me out."

The show went on magnificently for years, without a single circus fire. Monkey Einstein, with much joy and purpose, continued his secret trick to satisfy his singular aspiration of keeping everyone safe. Numerous animals gained renown with acts stolen from the circus monkey. The circus grew much bigger, and Poker Joker became as rich as God and as plump as a hog. Monkey Einstein kept doing his job with valor, as he had to stand up bravely against the perpetual wrath of his fellow animals . . . forever after.

He found out that real life is unlike a fairytale.

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