



## A little med mag

**Ars medica: a journal of medicine, the arts, and humanities**

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In case you were unaware, “*Ars Medica*, Canada’s only literary medical journal, seeks well-crafted writing about illness, healing and art.”

Like a modest personal ad, this request appears on the Web site ([www.ars-medica.ca](http://www.ars-medica.ca)) of this brand-new quarterly journal edited by a group of psychiatrists at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto. The first issue of this traditional, paper-based publication appeared in the autumn of 2004. What caught my attention about the Web statement was the word “only.” One journal of medical humanities in Canada — that sounds pretty lonely. It speaks to the marginal existence of such a publication, and also to the audacity and faith of the editors in their creative initiative. They boldly state their editorial mandate:

We will attract artists from all disciplines — literature, painting, film, music, dance — to challenge us through word or image. We will explore the creative links that promote health and well-being and the dis-ease that results from the absence of such creativity.

This substantial mandate materializes as a smorgasbord of literary gastronomy in Volume 1, Number 1. There are platters of chicken and ribs among the 120 pages of poems, stories and essays, along with an unexpected yam vichyssoise and mango tofu sorbet. Main courses (a.k.a. “feature pieces”) by Michael Bliss, Katherine Govier and Michel Basilières didn’t whet my appetite. (And why is Basilières’ excerpt from a previously published work included in a journal that

respectfully requests new work only?)

The first issue of *Ars Medica* lays out variations on the theme of illness narratives. Jean Mason writes about her SSHRCC research into a tuberculosis sanatorium at Saranac Lake in the Adirondack Mountains. She identifies three poet patients who were treated, wrote verse and eventually succumbed to the original wasting disease. None is John Keats, the tubercular Romantic poet par excellence, but Mason’s piece reminds us that the act of writing poetry is often a source of consolation for the ill.

Ron Charach — Toronto poet, wit, and, it should be disclosed, friend of this reviewer — contributes a piece of short fiction entitled “Kids, Guns, & Plagiarism.” This satire on gun love in America has a definite metallic edge. The piece is compact as a handgun and Swiftian in its execution.

The poetry in the issue demonstrates that the muse of this art continues to work in mysterious ways. Jeff Nisker’s poem, “She Lived with the Knowledge,” teaches us the hard lesson that writing about your mother’s death from breast cancer doesn’t guarantee a good poem. Kelly Malone, exploring a similar theme from a self-conscious adolescent point of view in “The Day I

Grew Up,” better manages to refine the death of a parent to its stinging, fearful essence.

My favourite piece in the issue is by psychiatrist and teacher, Robert Maunder. “On Pathography” steps back from the writing of illness narratives to survey this “genre of literature composed of stories of being sick.” Maunder provides a reductionist summary of the themes that he sees repeatedly in this class of writing: “death and dying, dealing with doctors, sex and matters of the flesh, loss, monotony and fatigue, pain, aloneness, uncertainty, meaning, and self-pity.” Maunder uses illness narratives in his teaching of psychiatry residents. He features the work of Anatole Broyard, Robert Mason Lee and Tom Andrews, as well as writing by more widely known pathographers such as Oliver Sacks and Thomas Mann.

Maunder invites his students and readers of *Ars Medica* to ask the basic question, “Why do people write about being sick at all?” His answer: “Maybe all just need to tell their story ... to communicate an extraordinary, almost incomprehensible experience to listeners, who need just as badly to understand it.” It’s not a bad summary of why we all need Canada’s only journal of medicine and the arts — and why I look forward to Volume 1, Number 2, due to be published this spring.

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