

could truly process what it meant, would they still want to brave being out of the hospital?

Even now, when I look through the glass door into our backyard, I watch for a flash of white fur amongst the green and yellow. I feel guilty that we didn't watch our cat more closely, that he got out despite our best efforts to keep him safe. Is this what he really wanted — cold nights, no food, cars, dogs, danger? If his brain could truly process what it meant, would he still want to brave all these things just to be out of doors?

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Medicine and writing go well together, they shed light on each other and both do better going hand in hand. A doctor possessed of the writer's art will be the better consoler to anyone rolling in agony; conversely, a writer who understands the life of the body, its powers and its pains, its fluids and its functions, its blessings and its banes, has a great advantage over him who knows nothing of such things.

— Thomas Mann, 1939, *Joseph the Provider*

From Huth E.J., Murray T.J., editors. *Medicine in Quotations*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: American College of Physicians; 2006.

Poem

The stethoscope

I walk into the room,
The last in a long line of observers,
Not knowing what I am to see.
I hear him first.
His breathing is heavy, laboured,
So loud it almost drowns out
The droning of the machines,
The humming of the fluorescent lights.
He waves his hand weakly as we enter,
Trying to keep up a semblance of normality,
As if denying his situation.
And I play right along,
Pasting a bright smile on my face
And greeting him with enthusiasm
Both of us ignoring, in our own way,
The inevitable truth.
I glance at the monitors surrounding him,
Listen with the ears of a novice
As the more experienced physicians interpret the fuzzy screen images,
Examine his chest,
Confer with one another.
All the while me standing there with my clipboard,
A transient figure
In the final chapter of his life.
Merely observing, with my limited medical knowledge,
Barely able to grasp the jargon of the conversation going on around me.
Allowed to, in the luxury of my ignorance,
Spend my energy trying to look beyond the symptoms
Trying to see the man behind the patient.
I imagine how, later, his family will come to see him,
Once everyone clears out.
How will they respond
When they find out there is nothing to be done?
It is time to leave,
He waves once more,
“Nice meeting you” I say ...
Hollow, ridiculous-sounding words.
In the hallway the case is explained ...
I imagine him inside,
Alone,
As we discuss his fate.
We then walk hurriedly down the hall ...
My stethoscope slung snugly around my neck,
A false semblance of confidence, assurance ...
On to the next doorway.

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